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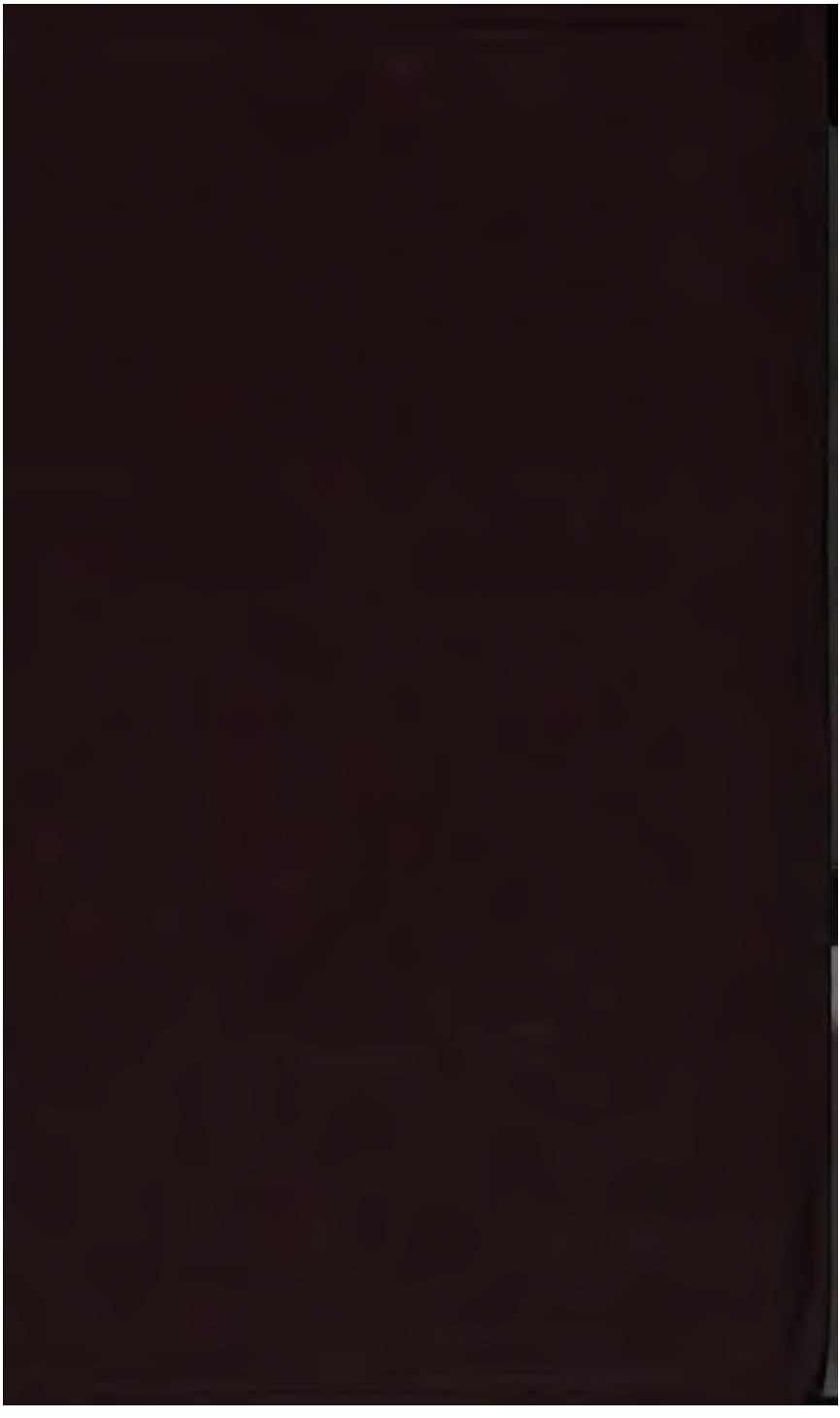

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MATTIE:—A STRAY.

VOL. II.

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BOOK III.

CONTINUED.

UNDER SUSPICION.

MATTIE: A STRAY.

CHAPTER IX.

THE CLOUDS THICKEN.

MATTIE had fully anticipated a visit from Mr. Wesden on the day following Sidney Hinchford's departure, but the master appeared not at the little shop in Great Suffolk Street. It was not till the following day that he arrived—at six in the morning, as the boy was taking down the shutters. Mattie's heart began beating painfully fast; she had become very nervous concerning Mr. Wesden, and his thoughts of her. Appearances had been against her of late, and he was a man who did

not think so charitably as he acted sometimes.

He gave a gruff good morning, and came behind the counter.

"You can do what you like to-day," he said. "I'll mind the shop."

"Very well, sir. I—I suppose," she added, hastily, "Miss Harriet has told you what happened the day before yesterday?"

"I know all about it. I don't want to talk about it."

"But I do, sir!"

Mr. Wesden stared over Mattie's head after his old fashion. His will had been law so long, that disputing it rather took him aback.

"I know that these losses put you out, Mr. Wesden," said Mattie, firmly; "that they are due to my own carelessness—to having been taken off my guard after all my watch here, all my interest in everything connected with the business. I dream of the shop,—I would not neglect it for the world,—and it *is* hard to be so unfortunate as I have been. Mr. Wesden, you wouldn't let me repay back the money which was taken away from the house; but

I must pay the value of that parcel stolen from before my very eyes."

"It was large enough to see," he added, "and I expect you to pay for it, Mattie."

"What was it worth?"

"You shall have the bill to settle, if you've saved as much—it will come in next week. And now, just understand, once for all, that I don't want to talk about it—that I object very much to talk about it."

"Very well."

The subject was dropped; Mattie felt herself in disgrace, and, intensely sorrowful at heart, she went down-stairs to tell Ann Packet all that her carelessness had brought upon her.

"He's an old savage, my dear—don't mind him."

"No, Ann—he's a dear old friend, and his anger is just enough. It was all my fault!"

"Well, he's not such a bad master as he might be, pr'aps; but he isn't what he used to be before my ankles took to swelling, nothing like it."

"It will soon blow over, I hope," said Mattie.

"Bless your heart!—puffed away in a breath, it'll be."

Mattie, ever ready to console others, received consolation in her turn; and hoped for the best.

Late in the evening, Mr. Wesden departed, and early next day, much to Mattie's surprise, Harriet Wesden, with a box or two, arrived in a cab to the house.

Mattie watched the entrance of the boxes, and looked very closely into the face of the young mistress. Harriet, with a smile that was well got up for the occasion, advanced to her.

"Think, Mattie, of my coming here to spend a week with you—of being your companion. Why, it'll be the old times back again."

"I should be more glad to see you if I thought there were no other reason, Miss Harriet," said Mattie—"but there is!"

"Why, what can there——"

Mattie caught her by the sleeve.

"Your father suspects that I am not honest—the past life has come a little closer, and made him repent of all the past kindness—is not that it?"

"No, no, Mattie, dear—you must not think that!"

"He has grown suspicious of me—I can see it in his looks, in his altered manner; and, oh! I can do nothing to stop it—to show him that I am as honest as the day."

"Patience, Mattie, dear," said Harriet, "we will soon prove that to him, if he require proof. If I have come at his wish, it was at my own, too, and you are exaggerating the reasons that have brought me hither."

"I wonder why I stop here now," said Mattie, thoughtfully. "I, who am a young woman, and can get my own living. If he is tired of me, I have no right to stop."

"You will stop for the sake of those who love you, and who have trust in you, Mattie; you will not think of going away."

"Well, not yet awhile. I think," dashing a rebellious tear from her dark eyes, "that I can bear more than this before I leave you all. And if things *do* look a little dark just now, I shall live them down, with God's help!"

"There's nothing dark—it's three-fourths fancy.

Think of my sorrows, Mattie, and thank heaven that you have never been in love!"

"Dreadful sorrows yours are, Miss Harriet, I must say!"

"People never think much of other people's sorrows," remarked Harriet, sententiously.

Thus it came about that Harriet Wesden and Mattie were thrown into closer companionship for awhile, and that Mattie began to think that the constant presence of the girl she loved most in the world made ample amends for the suspicions which had placed her there, for the absence of Sidney Hinchford, and the mystery by which it had been characterized.

"It's astonishing how I miss Mr. Sidney," Mattie said, confidently, to Harriet, "though we did not say much more than 'good morning,' and 'good evening,' from one week's end to another—but he has been so long here, and become so long a part of home, that it does seem strange to have the place without him."

"And the letter—he never got the letter, after all," sighed Harriet.

"There it is, on the drawing-room mantelpiece," said Mattie; "bad news awaiting his return. I see it every morning there, and think of his coming disappointment."

"He'll soon get over it—men soon get over it," replied Harriet, "they have so much to do in the world, and so many things therein to distract them. It's not like us poor girls, who think of nothing else but whom it is best to love, and who will love *us* best."

"Speak for your own romantic self, Miss Harriet," said Mattie, laughing.

"You never think of these things!—you, close on eighteen years of age!"

"Never," said Mattie, fearlessly; "I seem a little out of the way of it—it's not in my line. But—I understand it well enough."

"Or you would have never taken my part against poor old Sid," said Harriet.

"And that reminds me that I am neglecting poor old Sid's father, and I promised not."

Sid's father required no small amount of attention Mattie very quickly discovered; the absence

of his son preyed upon the old gentleman, and left him entirely alone. The place was a desert without "the boy;"—with all his love for him, he could not have imagined that his absence would have led to such a blank. He thought that he could have put up with it, and jogged along in his old methodical way until Sid's return; but the horrors seized him in the attempt, and it was more of a struggle to keep time from killing him, than to kill the hoary enemy by distraction of pursuits.

He became absent over the account-books at the builder's office, and the clerks laughed at him and his mistakes; whilst the employers, who had found him slow in his movements for some time, thought he was getting past work and becoming unendurable. These old-fashioned clerks will get in the way, when the hand grows feeble, and the memory betrays them. Commerce has no fine feelings, and must sweep them aside for better men without compunction.

Mattie, remembering her promise to Sidney, and favoured in the performance of it by Harriet's extra service, played her cards well, and helped to

wile away many hours that would have weighed heavily with Mr. Hinchford. An excuse to enter the room led to a remark concerning Sidney, which rendered the old gentleman voluble—and the presence of Harriet Wesden down-stairs, his son's future wife, formed a good excuse to lure him into the parlour, and persuade him to smoke his pipe there. Then Mattie began to think that she should like to know backgammon, and Mr. Hinchford condescended to instruct her, as he had instructed her, when she was younger, in orthography and syntax. And finally, when he was becoming excited about Sidney's non-appearance, and resolved one night to sit up for him, as he was positive of his return, Mattie essayed that difficult and delicate task which Sidney had confided to her—a task which Harriet was inclined to take upon herself—and somewhat jealous of Mattie being entrusted with it in her stead.

"He wrote to me the night he left—why didn't he ask me to console his father, I wonder?"

Mattie thought it was for the reason that consolation might be required at any moment, and that

Sidney was ignorant of Harriet's intention to stay a few weeks at Great Suffolk Street—but Harriet Wesden on the scene was no reason for Mattie to relinquish her rights. Besides, she had confidence in her own powers of breaking the news—and the unopened death-warrant on the mantelpiece was evidence of Harriet Wesden's rights being at an end.

The story was told by degrees then—what Mr. Sidney had said to Mattie and wished her to do,—told with a gentleness and earnestness which did credit to Mattie's powers, and proved what a thoughtful, gentle woman she was becoming. Under the circumstances, also, she made the best of it, and though Mr. Hinchford pulled at his stock, and ruffled his white hair, and took a long while to understand it, yet it was a successful revelation.

"Always considerate, Mr. Sidney is," said Mattie, in conclusion; "most sons would have spoken out the truth at once, and gone away, leaving their fathers wholly miserable; he went at the subject like a daughter almost—didn't he, sir?"

Mr. Hinchford had felt inclined to believe him-

self treated childishly, till Mattie put the question in this new light.

"Ah! he did——" he burst forth with; "he's a dear lad! What a lucky girl that Harriet Wesden is!"

Time passed on, and no Sidney's return. The nights drew in closer yet, and with their lengthier darkness deepened the shadows round the lives of all our characters. Sidney had stated his intention to write no letters, but they were expected nevertheless, and Harriet began to fancy that it was a little strange—as strange as her interest in Sidney and his movements, now that she had given him up for ever! A letter for herself, from Miss Eveleigh, diverted her attention somewhat—it had been sent to Camberwell and posted on by her father.

"Miss Eveleigh is very anxious to see me for a few minutes," said Harriet. "She and her mother think of getting up some private theatricals at New-Cross, and they want my assistance and advice."

"Private theatricals!—that's playing at being actors and actresses, isn't it, Miss Harriet?"

"Oh! yes. Such capital fun!"

"For the people who come to see you as well?" asked Mattie, guessing by intuition where the shoe must pinch.

"To be sure," responded Harriet; "they wouldn't come if they did not like, my dear; and the change will do me good, and I think I'll go."

Mattie detected a heightened colour in Harriet's cheek.

"You will see Mr. Darcy there?"

"Well—perhaps I shall," said Harriet; "and I have a right to think about him now, or let him think about me, if he will. Mattie, you don't mind me going?"

"Mind!—why have I a right to stop you?"

"No; only I shall leave you all alone with that wearisome old man."

"He'll not weary me. Old friends never do."

"That sounds like a reproach, but you don't mean it, Mattie," said Harriet; "and, after all, I shall not be very long away. I shall take the train from London Bridge, and be there and back by eight o'clock."

Harriet hurried away to dress for her expedition; she came down in a flutter of high spirits, a very different being from the despondent, lackadaisical girl of a few weeks since. She had made up her mind to begin life and love afresh; uncertainty was over with her, and she was as gay and bright as the sunshine. But hers was a nature fit only for sunshine—the best and most loveable of girls when the shadows of every-day life were not cast on her track.

"By eight o'clock, Mattie; good-bye, my dear. Any advice?" she asked, pausing, with a saucy look about her mouth.

"Yes. Don't fall too deeply in love with Mr. Darcy, before you are sure that he is falling in love with you!"

"I can bring him to my feet with a look," she said; "bring him home here with a chain round his neck, like an amiable terrier."

"Let me have an opportunity of admiring your choice soon—we're all in the dark at present."

"Yes, father and mother too, until poor Sid," suddenly becoming grave, "breaks the seal of that

letter it gave me grey hairs to write. Upon my word, Mattie, I found two in my head when I had finished it. I was *so* dreadfully shocked!"

"Well, the troubles are over."

"I think so—I hope so. Good-bye, my dear. Tell father where I have gone, if he should look in to-night. Home very early!"

She fluttered away, pausing to look in at the window and laugh through at Mattie once more.

"Perhaps it was as well she gave Sidney up," Mattie thought; "for she has been happier since, and all her dear bright looks are back again. What a wonderful man this Mr. Darcy must be! How I should like to see my darling's choice—the man that she thinks good enough for her! He must be a very good man, too; for with all her weakness, my Harriet despises deceit in any form, and would only love that which was honourable and true. But, then, why didn't she love Sidney Hinchford more; that's what puzzles me so dreadfully!"

She clutched her elbows with her hands, and bent herself into a Mother Bunch-like figure in

the seat behind the counter, and went off into dream-land. Strange dream-land, belonging to the border-country of the mists lying between the present and the future. A land of things beyond the present, and yet which could never appertain to any future, map it as she might in the brain that went to work so busily. Figures flitted before her of Harriet and Mr. Darcy—of Sidney Hinchford in his desolation, so strange a contrast to the happiness which he had sought—of herself passing from one to the other and endeavouring to do good and make others happy, the one ambition of this generous little heart. And her sanguine nature wound up the story—if it were a story—with the general happiness of all her characters, just as we finish a story, if we wish to please our readers and win their patronage. Even Mr. Wesden would sink his suspicions in the deep water, and be the grave-faced, but kind-hearted patron again, in that border country wherein her thoughts were wandering.

Mr. Hinchford came home early to give her a lesson in backgammon, and was sadly disappointed to find Mattie on full duty in the shop that even-

ing. He wandered about the shop himself for a while, and then went up-stairs early to bed, discontented with his lonely position in society; and his place was taken by Ann Packet, who had got "the creeps," and had a craving for "company." Ann Packet's ankles were very bad again, and it was dull work mourning over their decadence in the kitchen, with no one to pity her condition, or promise to call upon her, when she was carried to "St. Tummas's." Even she went to bed early also; for the customers came in frequently, and kept Mattie's attention employed, and it was scarcely worth while sitting in a draught on the shop steps, for the chance of getting in a word now and then, not to mention the probability of Mr. Wesden turning up, and scolding her for coming into the shop at all, an act he had never allowed in his time.

At eight o'clock, Mattie was left alone to superintend business; the supper tray for her and Harriet was left upon the parlour table by Ann Packet; in a few minutes Harriet would be back again.

At half-past eight, Mattie went to the door to watch her coming up the street, a habit with

nervous people who would expedite the arrival of the loved one by these means. The action reminded her of Mr. Hinchford, when Sidney was late, and when a few rain drops were blown towards her by a restless wind abroad that night, the remembrance of waiting for Sidney Hinchford startled her. "Just such a night as this when we sat up for him, and he came home at last, so wild and stern —when we had almost given up the hope of coming home at all—what a strange coincidence!" thought Mattie.

When the rain came suddenly and heavily down, the coincidence was more remarkable; and when the clock scored nine, then half-past, then ten, it was the old suspense again.

"What nonsense!" thought Mattie; "she's stopping up for the rain. It is not very late, and I am only fanciful as usual. Nothing can be wrong—it's not likely!"

Those customers who strayed in still, wondered why she looked so often at the clock, and stared so vacantly at them when they expressed their verdict on the weather; and the policeman on duty outside

observed her frequent visits to the door, and her wild gaze down the street towards the Borough. Yes, the old story over again—an absent friend, an anxious watcher, a night of wind and rain in Suffolk Street. The boy came to close the shop as usual, the door was shut *en regle*, and now it was Harriet's time to come back, rain or no rain, mystery or no mystery with her, and end the story *à la Sidney Hinchford.*

Mattie consulted a Bradshaw from the window, and found that the New Cross trains ran as late as twelve o'clock to London ; this relieved her ; Harriet was only waiting for the rain to clear up after all. But even midnight dragged its way towards her ; and then the time passed in which she should have returned, and still no Harriet.

At one o'clock Mattie went to the door and looked out ; the pavement was glistening yet, but the rain had abated, and the clouds were breaking up overhead. There had been nothing to stop her —even if Mattie had believed for a moment that Harriet would have stayed away for the rain. When she gave her up—when it was close on two

o'clock—the stars were shining brightly again, although the air felt damp and cold.

"She'll never come back any more!" moaned Mattie; "she has met with danger—I am sure of it! She has come to harm, and I am powerless to help her. I should not feel like this, if something had not happened!"

"Two," struck the clock of St. Georges, Southwark; in the stillness of the streets it echoed towards her, and sounded like a death-bell. Mattie covered her face with her hands, and prayed silently for help, for one away from home. Then she sprung up again, piled some more coals on the fire, stirred it, and sat down before it.

"I'll not believe any of these horrible things yet a while. It will all be explained—she'll be back presently, to laugh at me for this foolishness!"

CHAPTER X.

MATTIE IN SEARCH.

How does the time contrive to steal away from us when we are sitting up, feverish with fear for him, or her, who returns not? The dial that we stare at so often, marks fresh hours, and still further alarms us; but the night is long and tedious, and there's a stab in every tick of that sepulchral clock on the landing. We disguise our alarm from the servants, even from ourselves, and sit down patiently for the coming one—nervous at the footfalls in the streets without, and feeling heart-sick as they pass our door, and die away in the distance. We set our books and newspapers aside at last, and *wait*—we give up pretension to coolness, and watch with our hearts also.

Mattie waited, tried to hope, then to pray again;

gave up wholly after three in the morning, and cried as for one lost to her for ever. There was a reasonable hope in Harriet having missed the train, or in her having been induced to stay the night at the Eveleighs'; a reasonable fear—in these times of railway mismanagement and error—of an accident having occurred to the up-train. But these hopes and fears were not Mattie's; they flashed by her once or twice, but she felt that Harriet's absence was not to be accounted for by them. At four in the morning she took the big key from the lock, put on her bonnet and shawl, and then paused on the stairs, hesitating in her mind whether to apprise Ann Packet of her new intention or not.

Ann Packet would hear a knock if Harriet returned, which was unlikely now; she would not alarm Ann, or betray her friend unnecessarily. It might be necessary, who knows, to keep this ever a secret—she could not tell, all was mystery, dark and unfathomable.

"It's not a runaway match, either," thought Mattie, "for there was no occasion to run away, when Harriet and her lover could have married

quietly and without any opposition, at least on *their* side. Harriet knows that, and is not a girl to be led away if she did not. Weak in many ways, but not in that, I know."

Mattie disliked mystery.

"I'll follow this to the end!" she cried with a stamp of her foot—"to the very end if possible."

Mattie might have been spelling over a sensation novel, wherein the hero or heroine—*i.e.* the villain catcher — goes through the last two volumes on the detective principle; and it might have possibly struck her that if the "catcher" had started earlier and gone a less roundabout way to work—certainly a bad way for the volumes!—the matter might have been more expeditiously arranged. She could always see to the end pretty clearly—why not the 'cute-minded party in search?

Mattie closed the street-door behind her, and went out into the cold morning. The pavement was still wet and clammy; there was no "drying-air" in the streets, although the stars looked bright and aggravatingly frosty.

Mattie turned to the left at the end of Great

Suffolk Street, and proceeded at a rapid pace towards the railway station; there were stragglers still in the Borough—a broad thoroughfare, that never rests, but is ever alive with sound. Life still at the great terminus; a train hissing and fuming from its long journey, a handful of passengers by the mail, a few cabmen still looking out for fares, guards full of bustle as usual, one Kent Street gamin out on business, and dodging the policeman behind a Patent Safety.

Mattie went to business at once.

"Has any accident happened on the line to-night, sir?"

"Not any."

"What is the next train from New Cross that will reach here?"

"No train calls at New Cross till six in the morning."

"What is the next train that will leave here and call at New Cross?"

"Twenty minutes to six."

"Oh! dear."

A short spasmodic sigh, and then Mattie turned

away and went back to Great Suffolk Street, opened the door, and stole cautiously upstairs to the room wherein Harriet had been sleeping. Not there—still away from home!

"If anything has happened, I must be the first to find it out," thought Mattie, descending the stairs, listening at the foot thereof, and then passing out into the street again, closing the shop-door very cautiously behind her.

She had made up her mind to walk at once to New Cross, to seek out the Eveleighs, whose address she thought that she remembered. She went on at a rapid pace, with her veil thrown back, and her face full of interest—not a woman in the streets, hurrying like herself on special missions, or lurking at street corners, but Mattie glanced at for an instant as she sped along. She was a quick walker and lost no time; after all, New Cross was not a great distance away; she was not easily tired, and once in action, her fears for Harriet went further into the distance. She began to think, almost to hope, that Harriet would be at the Eveleighs', and all would end with a wild fancy on her part, at which

Harriet and she would laugh later in the day. Down the Dover Road, past the Bricklayer's Arms, and along the Old Kent Road, till the long lines of closed shops ended in long lines of private houses, the railway station and the Royal Naval School—that model of good management, by which we recommend all directors of seedy institutions to profit.

Near the railway station Mattie found a policeman, who directed her to the particular terrace wherein the Eveleighs were located. It was nearly half-past five when she read by the light of the street lamp the name of Eveleigh on the brass plate affixed to the iron gate. With her hands upon the gate, Mattie held a council of war with herself as to the best method of procedure.

Mattie had soon arranged her plan of action; hers was a mind that jumped rapidly at conclusions—was quick to see the best way. Arousing the house would create an alarm, and if Harriet were not there—of which in her heart she was already assured—it would only set the people within talking about her. That would be to cast

the first stone at her poor friend, and set the tongues of gossips wagging—that must not be! Mattie resolved to wait till some signs about the Eveleigh window blinds indicated a servant stirring in the house; she thought with a shudder of the shop in Great Suffolk Street, and the customers waiting for their papers; of Ann Packet's alarm, and Mr. Hinchford's perplexity; of the food for scandal which her absence would afford to a few inquisitive neighbours. Still all that might be easily explained, and it was only she who would receive the blame, if all turned out better than she dreamed; and if the worst were known, why, alas! her actions would readily be guessed at.

Fortune favoured Mattie in the most unromantic way that morning: the Eveleighs had resolved upon having their kitchen chimney swept at half-past five, and young Erebus, true to the minute, came round the corner with his soot-bag, went up the fore-court towards the side gate, rang the bell, and gave vent to his doleful cry. The maid-servant, however, was not prompt in her responses, and Mattie stood and watched in the distance, until

the sweep, becoming impatient, rang again, and rattled with his brush against the side of the door steps. From Mattie's post of vigilance she could just make him out in the darkness—a shadowy figure, that might have represented evil to her and hers.

Presently the bolts of the side gate were withdrawn, and Mattie with hasty steps crossed the road and hurried up the path. The sweep was being admitted at that time, and a red-eyed, white-faced, sulky-looking servant-maid of not more than sixteen years of age, was closing the door, when Mattie called to her to wait.

Surprised at this strange apparition at so early an hour, the girl waited and stared.

Mattie's plan of action would have done credit to a detective policeman; her questions seemed so wide of the mark, and kept suspicion back from her whom she loved so well. Certainly they implicated another, and drew attention to him in a marked manner; but he was a man, and could bear it, thought Mattie, and if he were at the bottom of the mystery, there was no need to study

him—rather to track him out and come face to face with him!

"Will you tell Mr. Darcy that I wish to speak a few words with him immediately?"

"Mr. Darcy don't live here," said the astonished servant.

"He visits here—he stayed here last night."

"No, he didn't," was the abrupt reply; "he went away at ten o'clock."

"With Miss Wesden, of course," was the apparently careless answer.

"Yes, with Miss Wesden. He never stops here."

"Where does he live?"

"I don't know—somewhere about here, I believe."

"Ask his address of your mistress," cried Mattie, becoming excited as the truth seemed to loom before her with all its horror; "I must see him!"

The servant-maid's eyes became rounder, and she gasped forth—

"I'll—I'll wake missus."

"Ask her to oblige me with Mr. Darcy's address—and please make haste."

The servant withdrew, leaving Mattie standing

in the draughty side passage, dark and dense as the fate of her whom she loved appeared to be from that day. She could hear the sweep bustling and bundling about the kitchen noisily; it seemed an age before the servant's feet came clumpeting down the stairs again.

"It's number fourteen, St. Olave's Terrace, Old Kent Road."

"Thank you."

Mattie turned away, and ran down the fore court at a rapid pace.

"Well—I *never!*" ejaculated the amazed domestic. "What's Mr. Darcy gone and done, I wonder?"

Mattie darted backward on her homeward route; her plans of action were at sea now; she only wished to know the worst, and feel the strength to face it for others' sakes, not for her own. There were an old man and an old woman to comfort in their latter days, to become a daughter to in the place of her who had been spirited away—give her strength to solace them in the deep misery upon its way.

People were stirring in the streets although the day was dark, and the sky above still full of stars. Mattie made many inquiries, and at last found St. Olave's Terrace, a row of large, gloomy houses, of red brick. At No. 14 Mattie knocked long and vigorously, until a window was opened in the first floor, and a boy's head protruded—the unkempt head of a page.

"What's the row down there?" he shouted.

"Mr. Darcy—is he at home?"

"He ain't at home—he didn't come back last night."

"Are you sure?—are you quite sure?"

"I should think I was," replied young Impudence. "Who shall I say called—Walker?"

"No matter—no matter."

Mattie turned and hurried away again. Close upon six o'clock, and an empty cab before a public-house door. Mattie ran into the public-house, and found the cabman drinking neat gin at the bar, and bewailing the hardness of the times to the barman, who was yawning fearfully.

"Is your cab engaged?"

"Where do you wan't to go, Miss?" asked the cabman. "If it's Greenwich way, I've got a party to take up in five minutes time!"

"Suffolk Street, Borough. I—I don't mind what I pay to get there quickly."

"Jump in, Miss—I'll drive you there in no time."

Mattie entered the cab, the cabman mounted the box, and away they went down the Old Kent Road. The cabman had been up all night, calling at many night-houses in his route, and always taking gin with despatch and gusto. He was reckless with his whip, unmerciful to his horse, and disregardful of the cab, which he had out on hire. He was just intoxicated enough to be confidential, mysterious, and sympathizing. He lowered the glass window at his back, and looked through at Mattie.

"Lor bless you! I wouldn't cry about a bit of a spree," he said, suddenly, so close to Mattie's ear, that she jumped to the other seat with affright; "if you've kep it up late, tell your missus, or your mother, that they wouldn't let you leave afore—she was young herself once, I daresay!"

"Drive on, please!—drive on!"

"I'm driving my hardest, my child—cutting off all the corners—that's only a kub-stone, don't be frightened, m'child—soon be home now. They won't say much to you, if you'll on'y tell 'em that they was young once 'emselves, and shouldn't be too hard upon a gal—that's on'y another kub-stone," he explained again, as a sudden jolting nearly brought the bottom out of the cab; "we shan't be long now—don't cry any more—I hope this here'll be a blessed warning to you!"

And suddenly becoming stern and full of reproof, he shook his head at Mattie, drew up the window, and directed his whole attention to his quadruped, which he had evidently made up his mind to cut in half between Old Kent Road and Great Suffolk Street.

At half-past six Mattie was turning the corner of the well-known street; she looked from the cab window towards the stationer's shop. The shutters were closed still, but the news-boy was at the open door, muffled to the nose in his worsted comforter. Mattie sprung out, paid her fare, and

ran into the shop, where Ann Packet, with her eyes red with weeping, rushed at her at once, and began to cry and shake her.

"Oh! Mattie, Mattie, where *have* you been?—what's the matter?"

"Nothing much—don't ask me just yet. How long have you been up?"

"I overslept myself—oh! dear, dear, dear!—and just got up in a fright—that boy skeering me so with the heels of his boots aginst the door. And oh! dear, dear, dear!—I found the shop all dark, and just let him in, and was going up to call you, when here you are—oh! where *have* you been?"

"I'l tell you presently—let me think a bit—I'm not well, Ann."

"You've been to a doctor's. Oh! my dear, my dear, what has happened to you? You came back in a cab—you've hurt yourself somehow, and I to be so unfeeling and wicked as to think that, that you'd gone out of your mind, perhaps—for you always was a strange gal, and like nobody else, wasn't you? Shall I run up-stairs and wake Miss Harriet?"

"No, no—*not for the world!* Go down-stairs and make haste with the coffee, Ann, please. And you boy, don't stare like that," snapped Mattie, "but take the shutters down."

Ann scuttled down-stairs, forgetful of her ankles, in her excitement at the novel position of affairs; the boy took down the shutters and disclosed the cabman still before the door, carefully examining his horse, and rather evilly disposed towards himself for the damage he had done the animal and cab in his excitement. Mattie went into the parlour, where the gas burned still, and stood by the table reflecting on the end—what was to be done now?—whether it were better to keep up the mystery, to allege some reason for Harriet's absence, frame some white lie that might keep Ann Packet and Mr. Hinchford appeased, and save *her* name for a short while longer?

When the boy came staggering in with the third shutter, a new thought—a forlorn hope—suggested itself.

"Wait here and mind the shop till I come down, William," she said.

She went up-stairs in her bonnet and shawl, and pushed open the door of Harriet Wesden's room. Empty and unoccupied, as she might have known, and yet which, in defiance of possibilities, she had gone up to explore again. The blind was undrawn, and the faint glimmer of the late dawning was stealing into the room, and scaring the shadows back.

Mattie gave way at the desolation of the place; and flung herself upon her knees at the bed's foot.

"Oh! my darling, God forgive you, and watch over you—oh! my darling, whom I loved more than a sister, and who is for ever—for ever—lost to me!"

"*No*—NO—Mattie!"

Mattie leaped to her feet, and with a cry scarcely human, rushed towards the speaker in the doorway —the speaker who, white and trembling, opened her arms and received her on her throbbing breast. Harriet Wesden had come back again!

CHAPTER XI.

EXPLANATIONS.

MATTIE shed many tears of joy at Harriet's return; she was a strong-minded young woman in her way, but the tension of nerve, and the reaction which followed it, had been too much for her, and she was, for a short while, a child in strength and self-command. For awhile they had changed places, Mattie and Harriet—Mattie becoming the agitated and weak girl, Harriet remaining firm, and maintaining an equable demeanour.

"Courage, Mattie!—what have you to give way at?" she said, at last.

"There, I'm better now," said Mattie, looking up into Harriet's face, and keeping her hands upon her shoulders; "and now, will you trust in me?—tell me the whole truth—keep nothing back."

"From you—nothing!"

"And if he has been coward enough to lead you away by the snares of your affection——"

"Affection!" cried Harriet. "I hate him! Coward enough!—he is coward enough for anything that would degrade me—and villain enough to spare no pains to place me in his power. Oh! Mattie—Mattie—what had I done to make him think so meanly of me?—to lead him on to plot against me in so poor and miserable a fashion?"

"You have escaped from him?"

"Thank God, yes!"

Mattie could have cried again with joy, but Harriet's excitement recalled her to self-command—Harriet, who stood there with her whole frame quivering with passion and outraged pride—a woman whom Mattie had not seen till then.

"Mattie," she said, "that man, Maurice Darcy, thought that if I were weak enough to love him, I was weak enough to fly with him, forget my woman's pride, my father, home, honour, and fling all away for his sake. He did not know me, or understand me; my God! he did not think that

there were any good thoughts in me, or he would not have acted as he did. I have been blind—I have been a fool until to-night!

She stamped her foot upon the floor until everything in the room vibrated; she caught Mattie's inquiring, earnest looks towards her and went on again—

"You and I, Mattie, must keep this ever a secret between us; for my sake, I am sure you will—for the sake of my good name, which that man's trickery has tarnished, however completely I have baffled him and shamed him. Mattie, he was at the Eveleighs' last night with his guilty plans matured. I had every confidence in him and his affection for me. I was off my guard, and believed that he was free from guile himself. At ten o'clock—beyond my time—I left the Eveleighs'; he was my escort to the railway station; he spoke of his love for me for the first time, and I was agitated and blinded by his seeming fervour. I told him of my promise to Sidney, and what I had done for his sake. I led him to think—fool that I was—that he had won my love long since. At the railway station he told

me the story of his life—a lie from beginning to end—of his father's pride, of the secrecy with which our future marriage must be kept for awhile, away from that father—talking, protesting, explaining, until the train came up and he had placed me in the carriage."

"Ah! I see!" exclaimed Mattie.

"He followed me at the last moment, stating that he had business in London, and then the train moved on—FOR DOVER!"

"Yes, he *was* a villain and coward!" cried Mattie, setting her teeth and clenching her hands spasmodically; "go on!"

"In less then five minutes I was aware of the deception that had been practised on me. I woke suddenly to the whole truth, to my own folly in believing in this man. He would have feigned it to be a mistake at first—a mistake on his own part—and for my own safety, alone with him there, and the train shrieking along into the night, I professed to believe him, and mourned over the clumsy blunder which was taking us away from home; but I was on my guard, and my reserve, my alarm, kept

him cautious. I sat cowering from him in the extreme corner of the carriage, and he sat maturing his plans, and marking out, as he thought, his way. He confessed at last that it was a deeply-laid scheme to secure what he called his happiness. He swore to be a brother to me, a faithful friend in whom every trust might be put until we were married at Calais; but the mask had dropped, and my heart, throbbing with my humiliation, had turned utterly against him. I lowered the carriage window, and sat watchful of him, knowing every word he uttered then to be a lie, and feeling that he looked upon me as a girl easily to be led astray —a shop-keeper's daughter, whose self-respect was quickly deadened, and whose vanity was sufficient to lead her on to ruin. But I bade him keep his seat away from me, and give me time to think of what he had said—time to believe in him! We were silent the rest of the way to Ashford. My throat was choking with the angry words which burned to leap forth and denounce him for his knavery—he who sat smiling at the success in store for him. At Ashford, thank God! the train stopped."

"Thank God!" whispered Mattie also.

"I opened the door suddenly, Mattie, and leaped forth like a madwoman; he followed me to the platform, when I turned upon him like—like a she-wolf!" she cried, vehemently, "and denounced him for the cowardly wretch he had been to me. There were a few guards about, and one gentleman, and they were my audience. I claimed their protection from the man; I told them how I had been tricked into that train and led away from home; I asked them if they had daughters whom they loved to protect me and send me back again secure from him. Mattie, I shamed him to his soul!"

"Bravo!—bravo!" cried Mattie, giving two leaps in the air in her excitement; "that's my own darling, whose heart was ever strong and true enough!"

"Only her head a little weak, and likely to be turned—eh, Mattie?" said Harriet, in a less excited strain; "well, I am sobered now for ever—and every scrap of romantic feeling has been torn to shreds. I must have been under a spell, for it

seems like an evil dream now that I could ever have thought of loving that man."

"And they took your part at the station?"

"Yes,—and gave me advice, and were kind to me, and he who attempted to deceive me skulked back into the carriage, muttering a hundred excuses, which I did not hear. The gentleman who had listened to my story, and been prepared to defend me, had it been necessary, followed Mr. Darcy to the carriage, added a few stern words, and then returned to offer me advice how to proceed. He was a strange, eccentric man, very harsh even with me in his speech, and disposed to preach a sermon on the warning I had had, as though I were not likely to take a lesson from my over-confidence, after all that had happened. But he was very kind in act, and meant all for my good, though he might have spared me just a little more. He consulted the railway time-tables for me, made many inquiries of the guards, whom he appeared to disbelieve, for he went back to the time-tables again; finally told me that there was no train till a quarter past five by which I could reach home. He showed me an

hotel adjacent to the station, and left me there, after again upbraiding me for my want of judgment; and at a quarter past five—what an age it seemed before that time came round!—I left Ashford once again for home."

"And are here safe from danger—to make my heart light again with the sight of you. Well, my dear, we'll think it all an ugly dream—and shut *him* away in it for ever."

"And now—what will the world think of me?—how much of the story will it believe, Mattie?" was the scornful answer.

"What will the world know of it? You and I can keep the secret between us. Mr. Darcy will not boast of his humiliation. The old people need not be harassed and perplexed by all that has happened this night."

"No, no—all an ugly dream, as you say, Mattie!" remarked Harriet; "perhaps it is best, and a woman's fame is hard to establish, on her own explanation of such a history as mine. Let it sink. I am verily ashamed of it. My blood will boil at every chance allusion that associates itself with

last night. Oh! my poor, dear, truthful Sid, to think of turning away from *you* and believing in a heartless villain."

"Ah! Sidney!" exclaimed Mattie.

"Whatever happens—whatever the future may bring—that letter, Mattie, must be destroyed. It is a false statement. We must secure it and destroy it. With time before me, and the dark memory shut out, how I will love that faithful heart!"

"Trust the letter to me—trust—oh! the shop, the shop all this while!—and I haven't told you my story."

"Presently then, Mattie. I would go down now."

"Yes, I will go down. I have been very neglectful of business in my joy at seeing you again. It did not seem possible a few hours ago that all would have ended fairly like this. I am so happy—so very happy now, dear Harriet!"

She shook Harriet by both hands, kissed her once more, and even cried a little before she made a hasty dash from the room to the stairs. At the second landing, outside Mr. Hinchford's apart-

ments, she remembered the letter—the evidence of Harriet's past romance in which Sidney Hinchford played no part.

Mattie pictured the future as very bright and glowing after this—the two who had been ever kind to her, and helped so greatly towards her better life, would come together after all, and make the best and truest couple in the world!

Mattie's training—moral training it may be called—was scarcely a perfect one. She had been taught what was honest and truthful; she was far away for ever from the old life; but the fine feelings—the sensitiveness to the *minutiæ* of goodness—were wanting just then. The means to the end were not particularly to be studied, so that the end was good. Harriet had done no wrong, merely been duped by a specious scamp for awhile; but keep the story dark for the sake of the suspicions it cast on minds inclined to doubt good in anything—and for the sake of general peace, make away with the letter—Sidney Hinchford's property as much as the locket she stole from him when she was eleven years of age.

Harriet Wesden was silent from fear and shame; her nature was a timid one, and shrank back from painful avowals; Mattie did not look at the subject in the best light, and thought of promoting happiness by secrecy, a dangerous experiment, that may tend at any moment to an explosion. Mattie opened the drawing-room door softly and looked in. Mr. Hinchford had not appeared yet, and she entered and went direct to the mantel-piece, on which the letter had lain ever since its arrival. The letter was gone!

"Oh! dear!—oh! dear!—what's to be done now?" cried Mattie, looking from the centre table to the side table on which was Sidney's desk, unlocked. Mattie did not think of appearances when she opened the desk and began turning over its contents with a hasty hand—a suspicious-looking operation, in which she was discovered by Mr. Hinchford, who entered the room suddenly.

"Mattie," he said, sternly, "I should not have thought that you would have been guilty of this meanness."

Mattie, with her bonnet and shawl on, and

awry from her past movements, with her face pale and haggard from want of sleep, remained with her hands in the desk, looking hard at the new comer. Her instinct was to tell the truth—there was no harm in it.

"I am looking for the letter which came for Mr. Sidney—I want it back."

"Want it back!—what letter?"

"The letter which has been on the mantelpiece all the week—it was Miss Harriet's—she wishes to have it back, to put something else in it."

"Bless my soul!—very odd," said Mr. Hinchford; "I'll give it to Miss Harriet myself—there's no occasion to rummage my boy's desk about. I dont like it, Mattie—I am extremely displeased."

"I am very sorry," said Mattie, submissively; "I did not think what I was doing. And you will give the letter to Miss Harriet?"

"It's in the breast-pocket of my coat—I'll give it her."

Mattie cowered before the flushed face, and the stern look thereon; this man was a friend of hers,

too—one of the rescuers!—whom she would always bear in kind remembrance; she went softly across the room to the door, veering suddenly round to lay her hands upon his arm.

"I'm very sorry, Mr. Hinchford," she said; "it was all done without a moment's thought. You, for the first time in your life, will not be angry with me?"

"No, no, no, no," repeated the old gentleman, taken aback by this appeal, and softening at once; "I don't suppose you meant anything wrong, Mattie."

"Thank you."

Mattie went downstairs in a better frame of mind, and yet ashamed at having been detected in a crooked action by a gentleman who always spoke so much of straightforwardness, and had a son who excelled in that difficult accomplishment. She was vexed at the impulse now—what would any man less generous in his ideas have thought of her?

"Never mind," was Mattie's consolation, "I meant no harm—I meant well. And all will end well now, and everybody be so happy. What a

change from the terrible thoughts of only a few hours ago!"

She could think of nothing but Harriet Wesden's safety, and her own minor *escapade* was of little consequence. Thinking of Harriet again, and rejoicing in the brighter thoughts which the last hours had brought with it, she opened the door at the foot of the stairs and went at once into the shop.

Mr. Wesden was standing behind the counter, waiting upon a customer, as though he had never left Great Suffolk Street, and retiring from business had been only a dream.

CHAPTER XII.

A SHORT WARNING.

MATTIE stood in her disordered walking-dress, gazing at the stationer, for whose presence she could not account; Mr. Wesden looked across the counter at her.

"Will you go into the parlour, please?" he said at last.

"In the parlour!—ye—es, sir."

There was something wrong—radically and irretrievably wrong this time; however greatly Mr. Wesden had changed, he had never looked so strangely or spoken so harshly as he did at that time. Even the customer whom he was serving, and who knew Mattie, turned round and glanced also in her direction.

"Robbery!—there—there's been no more rob-

bery!" gasped Mattie, her thoughts darting off at a tangent in the direction of her old trouble.

"You can go into the parlour," he repeated, as harshly as before; "I'll be with you in a minute."

Mattie went into the parlour, took off the bonnet and shawl that she had so long forgotten, and which must have added to Mr. Wesden's perplexity, and then sat down, with her face towards the shop, to await her master's pleasure—and displeasure! There was trouble in store for her—perhaps for Harriet—Mr. Wesden had discovered a great deal, and she had to bear the first shock of the storm. She could see Mr. Wesden's face from her position; even at that distance it seemed as if the innumerable lines in it had been cut deeper since she had seen it last, and the heavy grey brows shadowed more completely the eyes. He was not his usual self either—the quick glance of the watcher noticed how his hands shook as he served the customer, and that he fumbled with the change in a manner very new and uncharacteristic for him. His habits, or his caution, had even undergone a change; for, as the news-boy came in at the street-door, he told

him to go behind the counter and attend to the customers till he returned. Then he entered the parlour, still flushed and trembling, yet so stern, and leaned his two hands on the table till it creaked beneath the pressure which he put upon it.

"Mattie," he said at last, "I think it's quite time that you and I said good-bye to one another!"

"Oh! sir!—*what?*" Mattie could only ejaculate.

"I've been thinking it over for some time—putting it off—giving you another trial—hoping that I was even mistaken in you—but things get worse and worse, and this last news *is* a settler!"

"Mr. Wesden, there must be some mistake."

"No, there isn't—don't interrupt me—don't make any more excuses, for I shan't believe 'em."

"Go on, sir," said Mattie, impetuously, "I don't understand."

"You need not fly in a passion, if you don't," he corrected.

"I'm not in a passion, Mr. Wesden—you *will* think wrongly of me."

"Just listen to this—just deny this if you can. You left my house in the middle of the night—

you have been up all night, and God knows where —you did not come back to this house—you, who have no friends to go to—until half-past six o'clock this morning."

Mattie sat thunderstruck at this charge, so true in its assertion, and yet the suspicions which it led to so easily refuted, or—she drew a long breath and held her peace at the thought—so easily transferred!

"You can't deny this," continued Mr. Wesden, in the same hard manner; "how long it's been going on, or what bad company has led you astray, I can't say. But you haven't acted like a young woman who meant well—you've been getting worse and worse with every day."

"It isn't true!" cried Mattie, indignantly; "I ——"

She paused again.

"Ah! don't give me excuses," he said; "I'm an old man who knows the world, and won't believe in them. I wouldn't believe in my own daughter, if she acted as you have done, or was ever so ready at excuses. No honest girl—I'm sorry to say it,

Mattie—would ever, without a fair reason, be walking the streets, friendless and alone, at such unnatural hours."

"Will you not believe me, when I tell you truly, without a blush in my face, that as God's my judge, I went out with a motive of which even you would approve."

"What was it?"

"I—I cannot tell you that yet. Presently, perhaps—if you will only give me time—not now."

Mr. Wesden shook his head.

"Mattie," he replied, "it won't do! It isn't what I've been used to, and I can't wait till you have invented a story and——"

"Invented!" shrieked Mattie, leaping to her feet, "what more!—what more have you to charge an innocent girl, who has thought of nothing but serving you honestly from the time you took pity on her wretchedness? You have turned against me; if you are tired of me, tell me so plainly—but don't talk as if I were a liar and a thief still—I will not have it!"

"You put a bold face upon it, and that's a bad

sign," said Mr. Wesden; "where there's no shame, only *bounce*, it takes away all the pity of the thing, and makes me firmer."

The table creaked once more with the extra pressure of his hands; the flush died away from the face, whereon settled an expression more steely and invulnerable.

"Oh! sir—how you have altered! What do you think that I have done?" cried the perplexed Mattie.

"See here," said Mr. Wesden; "I don't wish to rake up everything, but as you put it to me, I'll just show you how foolish it is to brave it out like this. I'm very sorry; I can't make it out, altering for the better as you had—it's bad company, I suppose. First," he removed his hands from the table, and began checking off the items on his fingers, "there's money missing up-stairs—a cash-box opened, and only——"

"My God!—has that thought rankled so long?" interrupted Mattie; "I don't wonder at the rest, if you begin like that with me. I'll go away—I'll go away!"

"It didn't rankle—I gave you the benefit of the doubt," said Mr. Wesden; "I wouldn't believe it, but I fancied that you were altering, and that something was wrong somewhere. It looked at least as if you were careless, and I thought the house might get robbed, or catch fire, or anything after that—and it disturbed my mind much; I couldn't sleep for thinking of you—and one night I came over here very late, and you were up talking and laughing with a young man in the shop, in the dead of night."

"That, too!" cried Mattie; "do you suspect *him?*"

"I suspected *you*, that's enough to say just now."

"More than enough!" was the bitter answer.

"And then a parcel disappears, and there's a lame excuse for that—and a policeman finds you in Kent Street at a receiver's house—the house of a noted thief, that you must have known long ago ——"

"I went there—but no matter, you'll not believe me," said Mattie.

"And so I was obliged to have you watched for my own protection's sake, and you were seen to leave the house last night, and come back in a cab after the shop was open. And if all that's not enough to drive a business man wild, why, I never was a man fit for business at all."

Mattie gathered up her bonnet and shawl from the chair on which they had been placed, and proceeded to put them on again, keeping her dark eyes fixed on Mr. Wesden's face.

"There's only one thing which I'll agree with, sir," she said, her voice faltering despite her effort to keep firm, "and that's the first speech you made me. It's quite time that you and I said 'good-bye' to one another!"

"Well—it is!"

"I don't know whether you wish it or not—I don't care!—but I will go away at once, trusting in Him whom your wife taught me first to pray to. I will go away without anger in my heart against you—for oh! you have been very good and kind to me, and I shall be grateful again when to-day's hard words go further and further back. I will

hope in the time when you will know all, and be sorry that you lost your trust in me so soon. Better to doubt me than—*others*."

She corrected herself in time; she remembered her promise to Harriet. She saw how easy it was for a few errors, a few mistakes to make this strange man forget all the good efforts of a life—deceived in Mr. Wesden as she had been, she could not gauge in those excited moments the depths of his affection for his daughter.

In the avowal there would be danger to Harriet; so, for Harriet's sake, let her take the blame and go away. Harriet could only have cleared up the last mystery—the rest affected herself. She had had never more than half a character—she rose from crime, and its antecedents rose again with her at the first suspicion against her truthful conduct. It was very hard to go away—but it was her only step, and he wished it also—he, who had been almost a father to her until then.

"I'll pack my box, and leave at once, sir—if you don't mind."

"No," was the gloomy response.

He was deceived in Mattie still; he had hoped that she would have confessed to everything, to the new and awful temptations that had beset her lately, and prayed for his mercy and forgiveness—begged for his help and moral strength to lead her from the dark road she was pursuing. He was disappointed by her defiance—by her assumption of an innocence in which he could not believe; and he could only see that her plans were too readily formed, and that she had already fixed upon her future associates and home. He was amazed at her way of encountering his charges; and as he had been only a business-man all his life, he could not understand her.

Mattie left the room, and he turned into his shop again, and dismissed the news-boy from his post of promotion. The matter had worried him, and was still worrying him. The *dénouement* was not satisfactory, and the world was hardening very much, or becoming too complex in its machinery for him. He had found Mattie out, and it had all ended just as he feared it would; and still his head ached, and his thoughts perplexed him!

He counted the arrears of Mattie's salary, and put it on the back shelf, ready for her when she came down, knocking it all over the minute afterwards, and sending two shillings under the shop-board, where the shutters and gas-meter were. He made mistakes with the next customer in his change, and would not believe it was his error, although he paid the man rather than get into a fresh dispute at that instant; he rummaged from a whole packet of printed notices he dealt in, a "THIS SHOP AND BUSINESS TO BE DISPOSED OF," and stuck it with wafers in the window, upside down. He would retire from business in earnest, and not make-believe any longer; he should be more composed in mind—more happy, when all this was no longer a burden to him.

He served his customers absently, and wondered —for he was a good and just man at heart— whether he was acting for the best after all; whether it was quite Christian-like to give up the child whom he had rescued from the cruel streets, five years ago, come Christmas.

CHAPTER XIII.

LEAVE-TAKINGS.

MATTIE went to her room and packed her box with trembling hands. She was very agitated still; there were many conflicting thoughts to disturb her natural equanimity. Regret at going away from the home wherein had begun her better life; indignation at the false accusations that had been made against her, and made in so hard and uncharitable a fashion; doubts of the future stretching before her, impenetrable and dusky, and the life to begin again in some way, to which she tried to give a thought, even in those early moments, and failed in utterly.

Over her box came honest Ann Packet to ask the latest news—to stare in a vague idiotic way when told it.

"I am going away, Ann—don't you understand?"

"Going away?—no, I don't yet. Going where did you say, Mattie?"

"Going away from here, where I am no longer wanted, where I am suspected of being all that is vile and wrong. Going away for good!"

"Oh! my gracious—not that! Because of last night—because of——"

"Many things, Ann, which I dare not explain, and which, if explained, perhaps would not be believed in by—*him*. But you, Ann—what will you think of me when I'm gone, and they say behind my back how justly I was served?"

"I say?—I say?"

"You'll hear *their* story, and I can't tell you mine. I can only say that since I have been here, there's not a bad thought had a place in my mind, and not a good one which I did not try, for *their* sakes as well as my own, to cling to. I can only ask you, Ann—you who have always thought well of me—to keep your faith strong, for poor Mattie's sake."

Ann Packet gave vent to a howl at this—wrung her fat red hands together, and then fell upon Mattie's box, as though our heroine had shot her.

"You shan't pack up no more!" she screamed; "you can speak to them as to me, and they'll believe you, or they're made of stone. Why, it's a drefful shame to turn you off like this, as though you'd been found out in all that's bad."

"Hush! you'll wake Miss Harriet, I daresay she—she's asleep still!—you will go now, Ann, please. I'm not unhappy—why, here's one to begin with who will always think the best of *me!*"

"The very best—as you've been the very best and the goodest to me, who used to snap you so at first, and feel jealous like, because they put you over me--but you won't mind that now?"

"No—no."

"And, Mattie, you don't want to go away and see nobody any more—to be quite alone and hear nothing of anybody? I may come and see you?"

"Yes—to be sure."

"And you'll write and tell me directly where you are."

"Ah! where I am. Yes, you shall know that first. And when I can prove to him that I have always been honest and true, I'll see him and his again, *not before.*"

"And I shall call and tell you all the news—listen at all the keyholes to hear what they've got to talk about."

"I hope not. But get up now, Ann, and go down-stairs, or they'll suspect something. I'll send for the box presently, when I'm settled."

Ann rose with clenched hands and swollen eyes.

"If I had the settling of *him!* I—I almost feel to hate him. He's a brute!"

And before Mattie had time to reprove the faithful Ann for the outburst, Miss Packet had left the room, and gone down-stairs to cry afresh over the breakfast she had to prepare for Mr. Hinchford.

Mattie passed into the other room, and found Harriet Wesden asleep, as she had fancied. The toil of yesternight, the excitement and suspense, had brought their reaction, and Harriet had flung herself, dressed as she was, upon the bed, where she had dropped off into slumber.

Mattie stood for a moment irresolute whether to wake her or no; had it been simply to say "good-bye," she would have hesitated longer, though she might have awakened her at last.

"Harriet—Harriet!" she whispered, as she bent over her.

The fair girl started up and looked at Mattie.

"What's happened now, dear?"

"Nothing very important," said Mattie, who had determined how to proceed. "I have been thinking of our next step together concerning last night. Your father is down-stairs."

"Oh! he must not know it—he must never know it!" exclaimed Harriet; "he is weaker in mind—more excitable, suspicious—what would he think of me, keeping the name of Maurice Darcy from him all my life?"

"Harriet, promise me never to tell him—I am not frightened at the truth, but of their perversion of it, destroying for ever your good name—promise me!"

"But why promise *you*, who——"

"Promise it. I am very, very anxious, for your own sake and for mine."

"I promise—I promise faithfully."

"Whatever happens?"

"Yes—whatever happens!"

"I will tell you why now. In the first place, I have found out that the world will never accept *your* statement, but believe the very worst of you."

Harriet shuddered; her own trustfulness in others—her vanity, perhaps, allied thereto—had led her to the verge of the abyss—and "miraculous escapes" are only for penny-a-liners, and romancists. She thought that Mattie was right in binding her solemnly to secrecy, and she repeated her promise even more solemnly than before.

"And in the second place——"

Mattie paused; she recoiled from the explanation, the trial of another parting with this girl for whose happiness she was about to sacrifice herself, and the good name for which she had struggled. Harriet looked ill and worn now, and she could not tell her all the news, her heart was too full.

"I would bathe my hands and face, and go down-stairs as soon as possible. It will prevent

suspicion, and you *must* stand up against the fatigue for awhile."

"Yes, yes, I can do that."

"Nothing can be helped now by confession; remember *that* when the truth would leap to your lips in a generous impulse, of which hereafter you would be sorry. Good-bye now."

Mattie stooped and kissed her—the quivering lips, the tear-brimming eyes, suggested a new trouble, and Harriet detected it at once.

"There is something new, Mattie—don't deceive me!"

"Very little—you will know all when you get down-stairs—be on your guard—God bless you!"

And Mattie, feeling her voice deserting her, hurried away. She went at once to Mr. Hinchford's room. Mr. Hinchford was becoming fidgety about his breakfast, and walking up and down discontentedly.

"They'll tell me I'm late again," he was muttering, when Mattie, *sans ceremonie*, made her appearance.

"Mr. Hinchford, will you let Miss Harriet have that letter at once? She's waiting for it."

"And I'm waiting for my breakfast, Mattie—it's really too bad!"

"I'll tell Ann; and—and the letter?"

"You're an odd girl; I'll get it you."

He went into the next room, returning with a letter in his hand.

"There!"

Mattie dashed at it in her impatience, and tore it into twenty pieces, which she thrust into the pocket of her dress, lest a fragment of the news should remain as evidence of Harriet Wesden's want of judgment.

"I say, my girl, that's not your letter, it's——"

"It's better torn to pieces. Harriet wished it, sir."

"She—she hasn't had a quarrel with my boy?"

"No, sir, to be sure not."

"I wonder how much longer he will be; there's—there's nothing further to break to an old man by degrees, Mattie?"

"Nothing further. I have a little news to tell you about myself, that I hope you'll be sorry to hear."

Mr. Hinchford's face assumed that perplexed look to which it had become prone of late years. Still he was not likely to be very much troubled —it was only about Mattie!

"I am going away from here," Mattie explained in a hurried manner; "Mr. Wesden will tell you the whole story, and it's not to my credit, looking at it in his light. You'll believe it, perhaps?" she added wistfully.

"Mr. Wesden is not accustomed to exaggeration, Mattie; but I will not believe anything that is wrong of you."

"I hope you will not, however proof may seem to go against me," was the sad remark; "he think's I'm wrong, and I dare not explain part, and cannot explain the rest, and so I'm going away this morning."

"This morning!"

Mr. Hinchford took a good haul of his stock at this.

"He don't wish me to stop, and I would not if he did," said Mattie, proudly, "so we are both of one mind about my going. And now, sir," holding

out both hands to him, "try and think the best of me—never mind the desk this morning, that was nothing, remember—*do* think well of one who will never forget you, and all the kindness you have shown me since I have been here."

"Mattie, let me go down, and see if I can't set all this straight," said the old gentleman, moved by Mattie's appeal.

"It could not be done, sir," said Mattie in reply; "you're very kind, but I know how much better it is to go. Why, sir, I have a great hope that they'll think better of me when I am gone!"

"But—but——"

"And so good-bye, sir."

The old gentleman shook both her hands, stooped suddenly and kissed her on the forehead.

"I can't make it all out, but I'll believe the best, Mattie."

"Thank you—thank you."

The tears were blinding her, so she hastened to the door, pausing there to add—

"Tell Mr. Sidney—oh! tell him above all—to

think of me, as I would think of him, whatever the world said and whoever was against him. Harriet will speak up for me when he has a doubt of my honesty, and he will believe her. Don't let my past life stand between you all and your better thoughts of me—good-bye."

Mattie was gone; she had closed the door behind her, and shut in Mr. Hinchford, who forgot his breakfast for awhile in the sudden news that had been communicated. He was forgetful at times now; his memory, though he did not care to own it, would betray him when he least expected it. In the midst of his reverie, a flash of a new recollection took away his breath, and brought his hand again to his inflexible stock.

"Good heaven!—not that letter, I hope."

He bustled into the back room, and searched nervously in the pockets of coats, waistcoats, and trousers about there. A blank expression settled on his countenance as he drew from the side-pocket of the great coat he had worn yesternight, another letter—the letter which Mattie had demanded, and he thought that he had given her.

"God bless me! she's torn up the letter that was given me to post last night!"

He made a dash downstairs, but Mattie had gone, and the double mistake could not be rectified.

Mattie had made her final leave-taking by that time. She had gone straight from Mr. Hinchford's apartments into the shop, taking up her position on the street-side of the counter facing Mr. Wesden.

"I'm—I'm ready to go now, sir!"

"Very well. I—I didn't mean you to go in such a hurry; but as you have looked upon it in that light, why I can't stop you. There's your salary up to the month."

He took it from the little back-shelf and laid it on the counter; Mattie hesitated for a moment; her face crimsoned, and there was an impulsive movement to sweep the money to the floor, checked by a second and better thought.

"Thank you, sir."

The money was dropped into her pocket; she looking steadily at Mr. Wesden meanwhile.

"I shall send for my box when I've found a home," she said. "Let the man take it without being watched; some of you might like to know what has become of me, and I don't wish that yet awhile."

"Where do you think of going?"

"Anywhere I can be trusted," was the unintentional retort. "I am not particular, and I have a hope that God will send a friend to me. I think of going from here to Camberwell to bid one friend good-bye, at least—what do you think, sir?"

"You had better not. She's ill."

"You never said that before!" cried Mattie; "ill and alone!"

"Harriet will return home when she gets up—she is just ill enough to be kept very quiet."

"I'll not go to her, then."

Mattie still fixed her dark eyes on Mr. Wesden; that steady, unflinching gaze was making the stationer feel uncomfortable.

"I don't know that there is anything else to say," said Mattie, after a long pause; "and I suppose—you've nothing else to say to me?"

"Nothing. Except," he added, after another pause on his part, "that I hope you will take care of yourself—that this will be a lesson to you."

Mattie coloured once more, and took time to reply.

"I would part friends with *you*," she said at last. "I have been trying hard to bear everything that you say, remembering past kindness. *You* saved me at the eleventh hour, when I was going back to ruin—*you* taught me what was good, and made this place my home; for *you* and *yours* I would do anything in the world that lay in my power. BUT!" she cried, her face kindling and her eyes flashing, "if it had been any one else who had spoken to me as you have done, who had cast such cruel slander at me, and believed in nothing but my vileness, I—I think I should have killed him!"

Mr. Wesden had never seen Mattie in a passion before; her frenzy alarmed him, and he backed against the drawers behind him lest she should attempt some mischief. His confidence in the righteousness of his cause was more shaken also; but

he did not know how to express it, having been ever a man whose ideas came slowly.

"Upstairs, a little while ago, Mr. Wesden," continued Mattie, "I thought that we were quits with each other—that casting me back to the streets made amends for the rescue from them years ago. I thought almost that I could afford to hate you—but you must forgive me that—I was not myself then! I know better now; and if I go back alone and friendless, still I take with me all the good thoughts which the latter years have given me, and no misfortune is likely to rob me of."

"But—but——"

"But this is strange talk in a woman who cannot account for missing property, and keeps out all night," said Mattie; "you can't think any better of me now—some day you will. Good-bye, sir—may I shake hands with you?"

"I—I don't bear any malice, Mattie. I—I wish you well, girl," he stammered, as he held forth his hand.

Mattie's declamation had cowed him, softened him. He was the man of the past, who had faith

in her, and whom late events had not changed so much. He thought it might be a mistake just then —he did not know—he understood nothing—his brain was in a whirl.

Mattie shook hands with him, and then went away without another word. Outside in the streets the traffic was thickening—it was Saturday morning, when people sought the streets in greater numbers. Mattie's slight form was soon lost in the surging stream of human life; Mr. Wesden, who had followed her to the door, noticed how soon she was submerged.

Five years ago he had taken her from the streets—a stray. Again in her womanhood, at his wish, he had cast her back to them a stray still—nothing more!

A stray whom no one would claim as child, sister, friend; who went away characterless in a world ever ready to believe the worst. She had spoken of her strength to do battle now alone, but she did not know with what enemies she had to fight, or what deadly weapons to encounter; watching her from that shop door, she looked little more

than the child God had once prompted him to save.

He could have run after her again, as in the old times, and cried "Stop!"—he could have taken her to his heart again, and began anew with her, sinking the incomprehensible bygones for ever.

But he moved not; and Mattie, the stray, drifted from his home, and went away to seek her fortunes.

END OF THE THIRD BOOK.

BOOK IV.

"WANT PLACES."

CHAPTER I.

"ONE AND TWENTY."

MATTIE'S box was fetched away from Great Suffolk Street; the man who called for it brought a note to Ann Packet, which she found a friend to read for her later in the day. It did not furnish Ann Packet with her address —"When I am settled, Ann," she promised, quoting her own words on that morning of departure, "and I am very unsettled yet awhile."

Poor Ann Packet, who had looked forward to paying sundry flying visits to Mattie, and upon spending her holiday once a month with her, mourned over this evasion of Mattie's—"won't she trust even in me, or think of me a bit?" she said.

In Mattie's letter was enclosed a smaller one to

Harriet Wesden, who understood the *coup d'état* which had ensued by that time, and was agitated and unhappy concerning it. This was Mattie's letter to Harriet Wesden, *in extenso* :—

"Keep your promise, dearest Harriet—never forget that your happiness, and that of others, depend upon it. Do not think that I have taken the blame, or am a victim—it is not only for my actions of that night that I have gone away. Sooner or later, it must have come. God bless you !—I hope to see you again soon. Your letter to Sidney is destroyed."

Harriet pondered over this missive. For weeks she became more thoughtful, and aroused fresh anxiety in her father—for weeks went on an unknown and fierce struggle to break away from her promise and tell all.

She had been afraid of the revelation, and what would be said and thought about it ; she had seen her innocence construed as half-consent, and herself set down as an accomplice in Mr. Darcy's plot ; she had feared losing the esteem and confidence of all who now respected her. But when

Mattie had been sent away for keeping out all night—and though she had not heard the story, she guessed of whom Mattie had been in search—her sense of justice, her love for Mattie, led her more than once to the verge of the revelation. Keeping her own secret was one thing, but the blame to rest on another was very different, and despite her promise—into which she had been entrapped as it were—the avowal was ever trembling on her lips.

After, all it was but the truth to confess—her father and mother would believe her; and if Sidney Hinchford turned away, why surely there was nothing to grieve at in that—she could not have loved Sidney, or that letter would never have been written to him! And yet let it be recorded here, Harriet Wesden's main incentive to keep her secret close was for Sidney Hinchford's sake. It tortured her to think that she should have ever entertained one feeling of love or liking for the Mr. Darcy who had sought her humiliation; the shock to her pride had not only turned her utterly away from Mr. Darcy, but the very contrast he presented to young

Hinchford, had aroused the old, or given birth to a new affection for the latter.

She valued Sidney Hinchford at his just due at last; she understood his patience, energy, and love; how he had been working for her from his boyhood, and what would have been the effect to him of losing her. She had made up her mind, when he returned, to give him all her heart, and sustain him by her love against those secret cares which lately had been shadowing him. She believed that her secret was for ever shut away from the light—that keeping it under lock and key would be better for Sidney, whose trust in her was so implicit. He had always believed in her devotion to himself; why should she break in upon that dream, now she felt that all girlish follies were over with her, and she had become a staid woman, whose hope was to be his wife?

She was consoled by Mattie's letter: "It is not only for my actions of that night that I have gone away. Sooner or later it must have come."

Mattie, ever a deep thinker, considered it best also

—by her confession, even Mattie would be unhappy; so Harriet kept her secret for everybody's sake, and made her last mistake in life. Mattie and she had both regarded the subject from a narrow point of view, and were wrong; the best intentioned people are wrong sometimes, and from young women, with their heads disturbed concerning young men, we do not anticipate the judgment of Solomon.

Harriet Wesden felt secure—knowing not of the letter in Mr. Hinchford's coat, of Mr. Hinchford's mistake and Mattie's. And yet the chances now were against the revelation, thanks to the treacherous memory of the old gentleman. He had mentioned his error in the counting-house to his employers the same day, and met with a reprimand and a supercilious shrug of the shonlders—"It was like old Hinchford," one partner had muttered to another, and there the subject ended for a while. Mr. Hinchford went home, resolving to restore the letter to Harriet Wesden, took the letter from his pocket and put it on the bedroom mantelpiece, to keep the matter

in his remembrance until he saw Harriet again.

There for two days the letter remained, till Ann Packet, in dusting the room, knocked it on the floor, picked it up and placed it on the dressing-glass, where Mr. Hinchford found it, and rather absently shut it in the looking-glass drawer, as a safe place; and then the letter passed completely out of recollection, there being a great deal to trouble his mind just then.

For they were not kind to him at his business, expected too much from him, and made no allowance for an old servant; and above all, and before all, the boy's birthday was drawing near—it was three days before Harriet Wesden's—and there was no sign of Sidney Hinchford on his way towards him.

By that time Mr. Wesden had found a customer for his business, which was to change hands early in February; and in February what would become of him, and whither should he go himself, thought Mr. Hinchford? Good gracious! he would have to change his residence, and his son perhaps never be able to find him! A horrid thought, which only

lasted till he thought of his son's business address, but *whilst* it lasted, a trying one.

When the birthday of Sidney Hinchford came round in January, the father grew excited; talked of his son at business all day, and worried the clerks about his son's accomplishments; returned in the evening to harass Mr. Wesden, always at his post behind the counter, for the few more days remaining of his business life.

"I have brought a bottle of wine home with me in the hope of the lad's return," said Mr. Hinchford, placing that luxury on the counter; "his one and twentieth year must not pass without our wishing *bon voyage* to his manhood. You and I, Mr. Wesden, will at least drink his health to-night."

"Very well."

"I'll come and keep you company, after tea, in the back parlour, Wesden, and we'll have a long talk about my boy and your girl. There should have been a formal betrothal to-night, with much rejoicing afterwards. To think of his being one-and-twenty to-day, and away from us!"

"It must seem odd to you. Perhaps he'll come back to-night."

"That's what I have been thinking, Wesden. I fancy if he were near his return journey he would make a push for it to-night, knowing the old father's wishes. I fancy, do you know, that if I had been your daughter——"

"Well—what of her?"

"If I had been Harriet, I should have remembered this day, and looked in for a few moments."

"Her mother don't grow stronger; she is fidgety when she is away, and the servant we have is not of much use."

"Then Harriet might have written, wishing him many happy returns of the day, or have come to congratulate me upon having such a son grown to man's estate."

Having expressed this opinion, Mr. Hinchford went up-stairs to the tea which Ann Packet had prepared for him—spent an hour after tea in putting the room to rights, opening Sidney's desk and lighting the table-lamp at the side thereof.

"Now, if he come home, and there's work to be

done—and if it's to be done, his one-and-twentieth birthday will not stop it—there's everything ready to begin!"

He went down-stairs to join Mr. Wesden in the parlour—the news-boy was perched on the chair in the shop, keeping guard over the goods that night—and found Harriet Wesden seated at the fireside.

"Why, it's all coming true," cried the old gentleman, seizing both hands of Harriet, and shaking them up and down, "and he's coming home!"

"Have you thought so, too?" asked Harriet.

"Well, I have hoped so, at all events; and it seems as if we were waiting for him now, and he *must* come. But don't talk too much about that, please," he said, with his characteristic tug at his stock, "or I shall feel as if something had happened when he keeps away. But we'll drink the boy's health, at all events, God bless him! and we'll have a game at whist, three and a dummy, and make quite a party of it in our little way. Sid one-and-twenty, Wesden! by all that's glorious, it's a

fine thing to have a son come to maturity!"

Wine-glasses were produced—even a pack of cards, a bran new pack from the stock—and Sid's health was drunk very quietly, without any musical honours, but very heartily, for all that.

And five minutes after the health had been drunk, Sidney Hinchford, portmanteau in hand, entered the shop, and walked straight into the parlour.

"I said he'd come!" exclaimed the father. "Many happy returns of the day, you runaway! God bless you, my boy, and grant you health and happiness!"

He wound up his wishes by kissing him as though he had been a girl. Sidney blushed, and laughed at his father's impulsiveness, and then turned to his two remaining friends with whom he shook hands—we need not add with whom the longer time.

"Finish your game at whist," he said; "I must not spoil the harmony of the evening. Here, shall I take dummy?"

"If you like. But we want to know——"

"Presently you shall know all—let us relapse into our old positions, just as if I had never been away, for awhile. How's Mattie—where is she?"

All three looked somewhat blankly at him. Mattie's departure, and the reasons which had actuated it, were more or less a mystery, and difficult of explanation.

Mr. Wesden acted as spokesman.

"I'm sorry to say she has gone away under very disagreeable circumstances."

"Gone away!—Mattie!"

"Your father can tell you all about it some other time," said Mr. Wesden. "I don't think we need spoil the evening by a long, sad story."

"Yes, but, dash it! disagreeable circumstances," said Sidney—"that's an awkward phrase, and don't sound affectionate. But, until to-morrow, we'll postpone all details. I'll take dummy, and be your partner, Harriet."

"Very well."

He did not know whether it were better to be Harriet's partner, or to be her father's, and sit by Harriet's side—that matter had always perplexed

him the few times he had played at whist with them. It seemed somewhat strange his playing at whist at all that night—his arriving from a long journey, tired and travel-worn, as evident from his looks, and immediately sitting down to cards, as though there were an infatuation in the game, which under no circumstances it was in his power to resist. Harriet Wesden thought it strange at least, and now and then furtively regarded him. He played whist well, as he did everything well he undertook—but his heart was not in the game, and more than once, as he held the cards, close to his glasses, in the old near-sighted fashion, Harriet fancied that the face assumed a troubled expression. The game at whist was over at last, and with it Sidney Hinchford's power of endurance.

"Now that is over, I think I'll tell you a story. I don't know three people in the world so well entitled to have the first hearing of it. I'll ask you, sir," turning to his father, "to give me courage, and see that I do not give way?"

Mr. Hinchford senior stared, as well he might, at

this—it placed him in a new position, and braced his nerves accordingly. Sidney had resolved upon these tactics on his homeward route; there was no chance of breaking *his* news gradually—the world would be talking of it ere the morning.

"I always hated dodging a truth," said Sidney, sturdily; "it's a bad habit, and don't answer. It's sneaking—isn't it, Mr. Wesden?"

"Well—yes."

"If there's good luck coming, go to meet it—if there's disappointment which you can't avoid, let it meet you, and not find you hiding away from the inevitable. Why, that's like a baby!"

"To be sure it is," said the father; "wait a moment—I'm not a bit nervous about this—I'll see that you keep firm, my boy, but I'll just unfasten this buckle behind my neck a moment. Now, then!"

"When I was one-and-twenty, there seemed reason to believe in a partnership in my masters' firm—my masters took a fancy to me when I was a lad, and very much obliged to them I was for it. By that hope in prospective," suddenly turning to Harriet Wesden, and leaning over the table towards

her with a very anxious look upon his face, "I was led, Harriet, to think too much of you—to enter into a half-engagement, or a whole one, or a something that kept me ever thinking of you, hoping for you. When I was one-and-twenty, I was to come to your father, and say, 'I am in a good position of life—may I consider Harriet as my future wife?'—he was to refer me to you if satisfied with my prospects, and you were—well, I did hope very much that you were then to say, 'Yes' in real earnest. All this, a pretty story, foolish for me to believe in—but a story ended now in an ugly fashion. Mr. Wesden," veering suddenly round to the stationer, "my prospects in life are infamously bad; my employers are bankrupts, and my services will not be required after this day month!"

Mr. Hinchford flung himself back in his chair with a crash that brought the top rail off,—Sidney turned at once to him, and laid his hand upon his arm.

"With my father to give me courage, I can bear this!"

"That's—that's—that's well, my lad. Keep strong—oh! Lord have mercy upon us!—keep strong, my boy!"

"I have been fighting hard to get the firm straight—I have been abroad to the foreign branch, working night and day there, my last chance and my employer's. I had a hope once of success, till the markets fell suddenly, and swamped everything—our weakness could not stand against anything new and unforeseen, and so we—*smashed!* It will be all over town to-morrow—but it was a good fight whilst it lasted."

"It's very unfortunate news," said Mr. Wesden.

"I'm not afraid for myself," said Sidney, proudly; "I think that with time, and health—ah! I must not forget that—I shall work my way somewhere, and to something in good time. But I shan't climb to greatness all of a sudden; and it may happen that at forty—even fifty years of age—I may be no better off than I am now. That I'm disappointed is natural enough, for I know money's value, and perhaps it was a little too near my heart, and this is my lesson; but the disappointment of

losing you, Harriet—of giving up that chance, as any honourable man should—is the one loss which staggers me, and will be the hardest to surmount. I thought that I would make a clean breast of it, and begin my one-and-twentieth year free, as land-agents say, of all encumbrances."

It was a poor attempt at *facetiæ*—a very weak effort to carry things off with a high hand, like a Hinchford. But he played his part well; he did not break down; he confessed his inability to keep a wife, or think of a wife, and he spoke out like one who had reached man's estate, and felt strong to bear man's troubles.

Mr. Wesden stared at Sidney long after he had concluded, and a pause had followed the outburst; Harriet Wesden, with a heightened colour, looked down at her white hands so tightly clasped together in her lap, and thought that it was a strange explanation—a strange hour for an explanation which he might have chosen his time to give to her alone. Surely she might have been offered an opportunity of giving an answer also, and spared that embarrassment with which his thoughtlessness

had afflicted her. Could her father answer for *her*, as well as for himself!

Mr. Wesden delivered his reply, after several moments' grave deliberation.

"Mr. Sidney," said he, "I always did hate anything kept back, and doubted the honesty of anybody keeping it. The truth, however hard it may be to tell, will always bear the light upon it, I'm inclined to think."

Harriet winced.

"And you've spoken fair," he continued, "and given her up like a man. Now let her answer for herself; if she don't mind waiting till you're able to keep her—till you're forty or fifty, as you say," he added drily, "why, I shan't stand in opposition. The longer the engagement, the longer she'll be my daughter. There, can I put it in a fairer light than that?"

Sidney's harangue, or Sidney's father's port-wine, had rendered Mr. Wesden magnanimous as well as loquacious that evening; or else, in business, his better nature was developing anew.

Now to such an answer as this, one can imagine

Sidney Hinchford starting to his feet and wringing Mr. Wesden's hand, or turning suddenly to Harriet and looking earnestly, almost beseechingly, in her direction. On the contrary, he remained silent and moody; Mr. Wesden's answer was unprepared for, and his compliment to his straightforwardness brought a colour to Sidney's cheek—for, after all, he *was* keeping something back!

There was a painful silence, broken at last by a low and faltering voice, the musical murmur of which drew Sidney's eyes towards her at last.

"Has Mr. Sidney the patience to wait for me, or care for a long engagement, of which he may eventually tire?"

"Patience!—care for an engagement!" he almost shouted.

"Then when he asks me again," said Harriet, "I will give him my answer. But," with an arch smile towards him, "I will wait till I *am* asked."

"Bless you, my dear girl!" exclaimed old Hinchford, "I feel like a father towards you already—as for waiting, every true boy and girl will wait for

each other—why shouldn't they, if they love one another, eh, Sid?"

His hand came heavily on Sid's shoulder, and knocked off his son's glasses.

"Ah! why shouldn't they, if they are sure of love lasting all the long time between engagement and marriage. Harriet! dear Harriet!" he exclaimed, "I will ask you presently."

"When the old fogies are out of the way, and the courtship can be carried on in the recondite style," cried his elated father; "a sly dog this, who will not be embarrassed by witnesses—eh, Wesden?"

Wesden gave a short laugh—a double-knock species of laugh, in which he indulged when more than usually hilarious.

"Ah! that's it!" he said; "and as for waiting, why Mrs. Wesden and I are an old couple, and mayn't keep you waiting so long as you fancy, Sidney. It isn't much money, but——"

"That will do, sir," said Sidney, hastily; "I must support my wife, not let my wife support me. Harriet," turning to the daughter, with an im-

petuosity almost akin to fierceness, "is it not time to return to Camberwell?"

"Oh! ho!—do you hear that, Wesden?" cried the father.

Mr. Hinchford had forgotten the downfall of his son's air-built castle, in the happiness which he believed would make amends for it to Sidney. And if Sidney were content—why, he was.

Harriet was glad of an excuse to escape. Two old gentlemen talking of love affairs—her love affairs—before the suitor, was scarcely fair, and her position was not enviable. And besides that, Sidney Hinchford's manner had not been comprehensible, and required explanation; she could almost believe that he did not desire an engagement; there was so little of the impassioned lover in his new demeanour. There was a mystery, and she would be glad to have it dissipated.

Harriet went away, escorted by her lover, and the two fathers drew their chairs closer to the fire and drank the health of the happy couple as they went out at the door.

"This is a proud day for you and me—to have such children, and to see them growing up fonder and fonder of each other every day—eh, Wesden?"

"Yes. I have been uneasy about Harriet, and leaving her alone in the world. She will be always happy with him, and have a good protector."

"That she will. How the little girl would have clapped her hands at this!"

"What little girl?" asked Wesden.

"Why, Mattie, to be sure. Mattie, who used to play the mother almost to those two, her seniors, and be always as interested as a mother in making a match between them."

"Ah!—Mattie!—yes!"

Mr. Wesden looked about for his pipe and his pipe-lights on the mantel-piece.

Mr. Hinchford drew his favourite meerschaum from his coat-pocket. The two old men faced each other, and began to smoke vigorously.

"I wonder where that girl has got to?" suggested Hinchford.

"It's impossible to say. In good hands, I hope."

"I'd lay a heavy wager that she knows whose birthday it is to-day," commented Mr. Hinchford; "she was a girl who never forgot anything."

"Ah—perhaps so!"

"And I think she might have cleared up the fog, if you had waited a bit, Wesden."

"Why didn't she, if she could?"

"I don't know. I promised to believe in her, and somehow I do."

"Can anything in the world account for a girl her age being out all night?" said Wesden.

"Ah! that looks bad—I can't get over that!" said Mr. Hinchford, giving his head one sorrowful shake.

Poor Mattie!—poor stray! whose actions, the best and most unselfish, were not to be accounted for, or done justice to in this world.

CHAPTER II.

SIDNEY'S CONFESSION.

SIDNEY HINCHFORD escorted Harriet Wesden home to Camberwell. A most unromantic walk down the Newington Causeway—sacred to milliners and counter-skippers—the Walworth Road, Camberwell Road, and streets branching thence to melancholy suburbs—and yet a walk that was the happiest in the lives of these two, though looked back upon in after years through tear-dimmed eyes, and sighed for by hearts that had been sorely wrung. Such a walk as most of us may have taken once in life—seldom more than once—a walk away from sober realism into fairy-land, where everything apart from love was a something to be utterly despised, and where love first rose to fill our souls with promise. What if the story

ended abruptly, and the waking came, and one or two of us fell heavily to earth—we did not die of the wounds, and we see now that the fall was the best thing that could have happened for us. We look back at the past, and regret not the sunshine that dazzled us there.

And yet there was a stern story to relate, and Sidney had escorted Harriet Wesden home, believing in the darkness rather than the light upon his way. He went forth regarding life literally, and he found himself, after awhile, in the land of romance, wherein sober existence had no dwelling-place.

Let him tell the story in his own way.

Harriet and Sidney had not proceeded a long distance together before he began.

"I think that I must have puzzled you very much, Harriet, by this evening's behaviour—by the way in which I received your kindness—more than kindness. There was a reason, and I am going to explain it."

"Is it worth explanation?" asked Harriet.

"I think so—you shall judge. It is an explanation that I cannot give my father, for it would

break his heart, I think, with the long suspense which would follow it."

"So serious an explanation as that, Sidney?"

"Yes. Is it not odd that, with my character for straightforwardness, I should have been all my life keeping back the truth?"

"From him—for his sake, only, Sidney?"

"Perhaps for my own—to save myself from a host of inquisitive questions, and an attention that would irritate rather than soothe—I am a very selfish man."

"I don't believe that yet awhile."

"When I came home to-night, I had no other hope than that you and your father would consider that I had not made good my claim to become a favoured suitor, and that there was nothing left me but to make my statement and withdraw my rash pretensions. You will pardon me, Harriet, but it had never struck me that you were strong enough, or—pardon me again—that you had ever loved me well enough to attempt a *sacrifice*."

"I was a girl—very vain and frivolous—you were right."

"I come back and find you altered very much, Harriet. I find the old reserve that piqued my pride no longer there, and, instead, a something newer and more frank, a something that says, 'Trust me.' Is that a true reading?"

"Yes," she murmured.

"I am vain enough to believe in the heart growing fonder during my absence—though I have always fancied the experiment full of danger for the absent one. Say that the heart has done so—or that I did not understand you. Still the effect was the same, or I should not have the courage to tell you the great secret of my life. If I believed that you did not love me, or that you had ever loved any one else, I would not venture to put you to *this* test."

Harriet hung down her head, and her heart beat rapidly; the old story was before her, and his very words seemed now to forbid its revelation. His firm, self-reliant nature had never swerved from her, and he judged others by himself. His was a love that had begun from boyhood, and grown with his growth; should she raise the first suspicion

against her by telling him all, when it was in her power—and only in *her* power—to make him happy, to make amends for all by her new love for him? Let him test her how he liked now, she was a woman who looked at life seriously, and the follies of her youth were over!

They walked on silently for awhile; they went on together, playing their love-dream out, and oblivious of the matter-of-fact world hustling them in their progress.

"This is the love test—and it must be a strange, pure love to exist after I have told all," he said.

"Do you doubt me, Sidney, already?"

"I cannot tell. I cannot," he added, more passionately, "believe in any affection strong and deep enough to last; but I can forgive, and consider natural, any love that turns to pity at the truth. Do you comprehend me?"

"Scarcely."

"Well then—*I am going blind!*"

An awful and unexpected revelation, which took her breath away, and seemed for an instant to stop her heart beating.

"Oh! Sidney—my poor Sidney—it cannot be!"

"Sooner or later, Harriet, it must be; mine is a hopeless case," he answered; "with care, and less night work, and quiet—that last means absence from all mental excitement—I may go on for a few years more; the last physician whom I have consulted even thinks he can give me ten years' grace. Now in ten years, ten of the best years of a young man's life, I ought to save, and I hope to save, sufficient to live upon. I may be over-sanguine, but if I get a good foothold I will try. And now where lives the girl who will accept a ten years' engagement, with the chance of a beggar or a blind man at the end of it?"

Harriet pressed his arm.

"Here," she answered.

"You will! There is the faith to wait, the courage to endure, and the love to sustain me. You are not afraid?"

"No—I have no fear," replied Harriet, warmly; "God knows that I *have* changed very much, and only lately learned to understand myself. I do

not fear, Sidney, for I—I have learned to love you, and, by comparison, to see how noble and high-principled you are. But oh! if I were but more worthy of you, and your deep love for me!"

"Worthy!" he echoed; "why, what have I done to deserve a life's devotion to me, save to love you, which was the most natural thing in the world. What have I ever done to deserve the happiness of winning your love—a long legged, near-sighted gawky like me!—and such a love as shrinks not from the dark prospect ahead, but will disperse it by its brightness, and keep me from despairing. Why, in ten years time we shall not be an old couple—I shall only be one-and-thirty, and you but nine-and-twenty. When the light goes out," he added solemnly, "you will place your hand in mine to make amends for it, and begin my new happiness by the wife's companionship; shall I be so very much to be pitied then, I wonder?"

"I hope not, Sid."

She had not called him by that name since he was a boy, and his heart thrilled at it, and took fresh hope from it.

"All this on my part, I know is very selfish," he said. "I have told you already that I am a selfish man, to wish that your youth and beauty and love should be sacrificed to my affliction. I did not think of gaining them; I was content to pass away from you, and see you allied to one more deserving, more fitting, than myself; even now, I will go away resigned, thinking you are right to give me up, if but one doubt linger at your heart."

"Not one," was the firm answer.

"I can bear all now—afterwards, a doubt would strike me down—remember that."

"Trust in me, Sid—ever."

"I will."

The hand that had rested on his arm was held in his now, and they walked on together, with their hearts as full of happiness as though blindness were a trifling calamity, scarcely worth considering under the circumstances.

Sidney had pictured so dark a prospect ahead, that this sudden change made all bright, and Harriet Wesden was happy in being able to prove that her love was unselfish and strong. She did not believe

that she had ever loved any one else then—she knew that hers was a different and more intense affection, something that felt like love, and that nothing in the world could destroy. Mr. Darcy was but a phantom, far back in the mists—his own dark efforts had utterly extinguished every ray of romance, in the false light of which he had luridly shone. Strengthened by her new love, she could have broken her promise to Mattie, and told all then, trusting in him to see the truth, and believe in her henceforth; but he had spoken of the danger of excitement to him, and once again—once for all —went the story back, never to hover on the brink of discovery again!

It was a strange courtship—that of Sidney Hinchford and Harriet's—but they were happy. The calamity was in the distance, and their hearts were young and strong. Both had faith then—and of the chances and changes of life, it was not natural to dwell upon, after the one avowal had been uttered.

"Then it *is* an engagement," he had asked hoarsely, and she had answered "Yes," with his own frank-

ness and boldness; and thus the path ahead seemed bright enough.

Outside the suburban retreat of the Wesdens', Sidney Hinchford had a little struggle with duty and inclination—conquering inclination with that strong will of his.

"I'll go back to the old gentleman," he said at last; "he is scarcely used to my reappearance yet, and a little makes him nervous. Good-bye, love."

A lover's parting at the iron gate, to the intense edification of the potman coming up the street with the nine o'clock beer; and then Sidney tore himself homewards, thinking what a happy fellow he was, and how the business disappointments of life had been softened by the events that had followed them. The future could not be dark with Harriet; before this he had become resigned to his calamity, bent his strong mind to regard it as inevitable; now there was to come happiness with it, and he would be more than content, he thought.

He was soon back in Suffolk Street. Mr. Wesden was in the shop talking to a short, thin man with a sallow complexion, a hooked nose, bright black eyes,

and straight hair; a man dressed in black, with a rusty satin stock of the same colour, secured by an old-fashioned brooch of gold wire, in the shape of a heart.

"And her name was Mattie, you say?"

"That was the name she called herself, and went always by in this house."

"And you don't know her whereabouts?"

"I haven't an idea."

"But you think she has gone wrong, don't you?" the man asked with no small eagerness.

"Well, I hope not; but I think so."

"Who? Mattie!" cried Sidney, suddenly thrusting himself into the conversation; "our Mattie—that be—*hanged!*"

He checked himself in time to save scandalizing the ears of the gentleman in black, who twirled round with a tee-to-tum velocity and faced him.

"What do you know of her, young man?" he asked abruptly.

"What do you want to know for?" was the rejoinder.

"I wish to find her—I am very anxious to find her."

"I hope you may, if it's for her good."

"Her moral and spiritual good, sir—without a doubt."

"You can't improve her. There isn't a better or more unselfish girl in the world!"

"*What!*" screamed the man in black.

"Not a better girl, I verily believe. I haven't heard the reasons for her departure yet," he said, looking at Mr. Wesden; "but they're good ones, or I was never more mistaken in my life."

"You are mistaken," said Mr. Wesden; "I've tried to think the best of Mattie, but I can't. There are no honest reasons for her conduct, or she would have told me."

Sidney Hinchford paused.

"It must be very unreasonable conduct then," said Sidney, "and she must have changed very much during my absence from this house. But, upon my soul!" he exclaimed vehemently, "I shan't believe any harm in her, for one!"

The stranger regarded Sidney Hinchford attentively, then said—

"You need not have brought your soul into question, sir. Pledge that in God's service—nothing else."

"Oh!" said Sidney, taken aback at the reproof.

"You speak warmly; and somehow I've a hope of her not being very bad—of reclaiming her by my own earnest efforts. Young man, I will thank you."

He stretched forth an ungloved hand, which Sidney took—a hard hand, that gripped Sid forcibly and made him wince a little.

"You all seem in doubt, more or less," he said; "and that gives me hope. Mr. Wesden and you don't agree in opinion, and that's something. Who's that white-haired man I see in the parlour?"

"That's my father, sir," said Sidney, smiling at the sudden curiosity evinced.

"Does he know anything about her?"

"Not so much as myself," said Mr. Wesden.

"Have you asked the servant—if you keep one?"

"I have asked her everything, and she knows nothing," replied the stationer.

"Then I'll go. I think I shall find her yet, mind you," he said in an excited manner. "I'm not a man to give up in a hurry, when I've taken an idea in my head. I've been sixteen years looking for that girl!"

"Are you a relation?" asked Sidney.

"Her father."

"Indeed!"

The stranger began hammering the counter with his hard hand, till the money in the till underneath rattled again. He began to take small leaps in the air, also, during the progress of his harangue.

"Her father—a poor man reclaimed from error, and knowing what it is to walk uprightly. A man who has, he trusts, done some good in his day—a man who now sets himself the task of finding that daughter he neglected once. And I'll find her and reclaim her—God will show me the way, I think. And you shall see her again, a shining light in the

midst of ye—a brand from the burning, a credit to *me!* There's hope for her yet. Good night."

And very abruptly the gentleman in black leaped out of the shop and disappeared.

"That's an odd fish," remarked Sidney.

CHAPTER III.

A FLYING VISIT TO NUMBER THIRTY-FOUR.

BEFORE Mr. Wesden had finally disposed of his business in Great Suffolk Street, he met with his greatest trouble in the loss of the companion, helpmate, wife, who had struggled with him for many years from indigence to moderate competence. Mrs. Wesden's health had been failing for some time, but her loss was still as unprepared for, and the husband bent lower and walked more feebly when his better half—his better self—was taken from him in his latter days.

"You have still me, remember," said Harriet, when the undemonstrative nature gave way, and he sobbed like a child at his isolation; and he had answered, "Ah! *you* mustn't desert me yet awhile—you must comfort me," and refused to be comforted

for many a long day. His character even altered once more—as characters alter in all cases, except in novels; and though the abruptness remained, and the silent fits were of longer duration, he became less harsh in his judgments, and more easily influenced for good. This was evident one day, when after an intense study of the fire before which he sat, he burst forth with—

"I wonder if I acted well by Mattie—poor Mattie, who would be so sorry to hear all the sad news that has happened since she left us."

Harriet, who had always taken Mattie's part to the verge of her own confession, answered warmly,

"No, *we* all acted very badly—very cruelly. When she comes again, as she will, I feel assured—I hope she will forgive us, father."

"Forgive us?"

Mr. Wesden had not arrived to that pitch of kind consideration yet, but Mattie's departure and long silence were troubles to him when he was left to think of the past, and of the business from which he had at last retired in earnest.

The shop had changed proprietors, and the

Hinchfords, father and son, had removed their furniture from Mr. Wesden's first floor to a little house Camberwell way, also. A very small domicile had this careful couple decided upon for their suburban retreat—one of a row of houses that we may designate Chesterfield Terrace, and the rents of which were two-and-twenty pounds per annum.

Mr. Hinchford, we have already premised, had somewhat lofty notions, which adversity had kept in check, rather than subdued. The removal to Chesterfield Terrace was a blow to him. The rooms in Great Suffolk Street had been only borne with, scarcely resigned to; but though he had lived there many years, he had never considered himself as "settled down"—merely resting by the way, before he marched off to independence and the old Hinchford state. It had been a mythical dream, perhaps, until Sidney's star rose in the ascendant, and then he had quickly built his castles in the air, and bided his time more sanguinely. When that vision faded in its turn, the old gentleman was sorely tried; only his son's strategy in

feigning to require consolation had turned him away from his own regrets to thoughts of how to make them less light for—the BOY.

But 34, Chesterfield Terrace, Chesterfield Road, Camberwell New Road, was a blow to him. The air was fresher than in Great Suffolk Street, the large market gardens at the back of his house were pleasant in all seasons, except the cabbage season; there were three bed-rooms, two parlours, a wash-house at the back, and a long strip of garden, constituting a house and premises that were solely and wholly theirs, and entitled them to the glorious privilege of electing a member for incorruptible Lambeth; but the change was not all that Mr. Hinchford had looked forward to for so many years, and he grew despondent, and fancied that it could never be better now.

The Hinchfords had taken into their service Ann Packet, of workhouse origin, and undiscoverable parentage; she had pleaded to be constituted their servant, at any wages, or no wages at all, rather than at her time of life to be sent forth in search of fresh faces and new homes.

At this period, Mr. Wesden had required a servant also, and Ann Packet had begged Sidney Hinchford to engage her at once, before she should be asked to continue in the old service.

"What! tired of them?" Sidney had said with some surprise.

"They gave me warning," replied Ann, somewhat sullenly, "and I accepts the same. They turned poor Mattie away without warning at all, and I never forgives 'em that, sir."

"Ah! you are on Mattie's side, too, Ann?"

"There never was a girl who thought so little of herself, and so much of others!" cried Ann, "or who desarved less to be sent out into the streets. I gave up the Wesdens after that, sir."

"But Miss Harriet is Mattie's champion also, and will defend her to the death, Ann."

"And will she be a Wesden all her life, sir?" asked Ann Packet, with an archness for which she was only that once remarkable.

Ann Packet became domestic servant at 34, Chesterfield Terrace, then, and congratulated herself on the kitchen being level with the parlours,

which was good for her ankles, and spared her breath considerably.

Meanwhile the shadows were stealing on towards the Hinchford dwelling-place; Sidney's month in service with his old employers had been extended to two months, after which the firm, utterly shattered by adversity, was to dissolve itself into its component atoms, and be never heard of more in the busy streets east of Temple Bar.

Sidney, it need scarcely be said, had not sat idle during the time; he had looked keenly round him for a change of clerkship. His employers had interested themselves in a way not remarkable in employers, towards securing him a foothold in other and more stable establishments, but business was slack in the City, and there were no fresh hands wanted just at present.

Sidney was not a young man to despair; he let no chance slip, and disappointment did not relax his efforts. He did not believe that the time would come and leave him wholly without "a berth." He had faith in his abilities, and he thought that they would work a way for him somewhere. And

even a week or two "out of work" would not hurt him; he had saved money, and could pay his fair share towards the household expenses as well as his father, who kept his place longer than Sidney had ever believed he would.

His father was more solicitous than himself; every evening he asked very anxiously if Sidney had heard of anything in the City, and was not greatly exhilarated by Sid's careless "Not yet." Things were getting serious when there was only a week more to spend at the old desk, where bright hopes had been born and collapsed; Sidney was even becoming grave, although his company manners were put on before the father, to keep the old gentleman's mind at ease.

But Mr. Hinchford's mind was not likely to be at ease at that period; he was playing a part himself, and disguising his own troubles from his son, thereby causing a double game at disinterestedness between Sid and him.

Three weeks before the son's time had expired at his office, Mr. Hinchford had received a week's notice to quit. His memory had again betrayed

him, confused the accounts, and put the clerks out, and it was considered necessary to inform the old gentleman that his services were not likely to be required any longer. The notice came like a thunderbolt to Mr. Hinchford, whose belief in his own powers was still strong, and who had not had the remotest idea that long ago he had been tolerated by his employers, and set down for a troublesome, pompous, and disputatious old boy by the whipper-snappers round him. His salary had never been more than thirty-five shillings a week, and he had put up with it rather than been grateful for it, looking forward to the future rise of the Hinchfords above the paltry shillings and pence of every-day routine. He had not anticipated being turned off—pronounced worn-out in that service which a Hinchford had patronized.

The poor old fellow's pride was touched, and he took his adieux and his last week's salary with a lordly air, looking to the life the gentleman that he had been once. He expressed no regret at the summary dismissal, but marched out of the office with his white head thrown a little more back than

usual, and it was only as he neared Chesterfield Terrace that his courage gave way, and he began to think of the future prospects of Sid and himself.

Sid was in trouble, and a little more bad news might be too much for him. He would try and keep his secret, until Sid had found a good berth for himself in the City. Affairs were looking desperate, and the revelation must come, but he could bear it himself, he thought—this weak old man with no faith in the strong son, whom an avalanche might affect, little else. Mr. Hinchford took Ann Packet into his confidence, and impressed her with the necessity of keeping Sid in the dark concerning the father's absence from business.

"Don't tell him, Ann, that I keep away from office after he's left—it's easy for me to make an excuse for an early return, if he come back before his time. I wouldn't have that boy worried for the world, just now."

Ann Packet, who took time to digest matters foreign to her ordinary business, was some days in comprehending the facts of the case, and then held

counsel with herself as to whether it were expedient to keep Sidney in ignorance, considering how the old gentleman "went on" during his son's absence.

"He'll fret himself to death, and I shall be hanged for not stopping it, p'raps," she thought.

Once or twice she took the liberty of intruding into the parlour, and recommending Mr. Hinchford, senior, to try a walk, or a book, or a visit to Mr. Wesden; and, startled out of his maunderings, he would make an effort to follow one of the three counsels, seldom the last, because Mr. Wesden was Harriet's father, and saw Sid very frequently.

He took many walks in search of a situation for himself, but the one refrain was, "Too old," and he began to see that he had overstepped the boundary, and was scarcely fit for a new place. He almost conceived an idea—just a foggy one, which, however, he never confessed to his dying day—that he *was* a little forgetful at times; for Chesterfield Terrace lay in a net-work of newly-built streets at the back of the Camberwell New Road, and he was always taking the wrong turning, and

losing himself. Still it was deep thought about Sid which led him in the wrong direction—presently his mind would be more composed; Sid would be in a good place, and he need not have one secret from him.

The last day came round; Sidney's services were over for good; he had had a painful parting with his old masters, who had been more than commonly attached to him, and he came home looking a little grave, despite the best face on the matter which he had put on at the front door.

"Anything new in the City, Sid?" asked the father.

"No, nothing new," he replied. "What makes you home so early to-day?"

Sid had turned in before the daylight was over, and found his father walking up and down the room with his hands behind him.

"Early?" repeated the old man. "Oh! they're not particularly busy just now in the Bridge Road. Very slack, I may say."

"Ah! I suppose so," said Sid, absently.

"And there's nothing new at all then, Sid?"

"Nothing."

"You'll keep a stout heart, my boy," said the father, with a cheering voice, and yet with a lip that quivered in spite of him. "I suppose, now, you don't feel very dull?"

"Dull, with my wits about me, and a hundred chances, perhaps, waiting for me in the City to-morrow!"

"Yes, you'll have all day to-morrow—I had forgotten that," said Mr. Hinchford; "to be sure, all day now!"

Sidney saw that his father was perplexed, even disturbed in mind, but he set down Mr. Hinchford's embarrassment to the same source as his own thoughts; he did not know that he had only inherited his unselfishness from his sire. Or rather, he did not remember, how an unselfish heart, allied to an unthinking head, had been the cause of the downfall in old times.

On the morrow Sidney Hinchford had the day before him, but the result was bad. He had visited many of the houses heretofore in connection with the old firm, but luck was against him, and many

objected to a clerk from a house that had collapsed. It had been a fair bankruptcy; one of those honourable "breaks up" which occur once or twice in a century, and are more completely break ups from sheer honesty of purpose than cases which make a "to do" in the Court, and march off with flying colours; but Sidney represented one of a staff that had come to grief somehow, and "there was nothing in his way, just at present."

Three or four days passed like this, and matters were becoming serious to the Hinchfords—father and son seemed settling down to misfortune, although the son betrayed no anxiety, and the father's care were for the hours when the son's back was turned. In fact, Sidney Hinchford was not quickly dispirited; a little did not seriously affect him, and he went on doggedly and persistently, making the round of all the great firms that had had, once upon a time, dealings with his own; abashed seldom, dispirited never, firmly and stolidly proceeding on his way, and calmly waiting for the chance that would come in due time.

Meanwhile the father went down to zero im-

mediately the door closed behind Sidney. He felt that he was not acting fairly by keeping the secret of his discharge from Sid; but he was waiting for good news, that might counterbalance the bad which he had to communicate. He knew that in a day or two, at the utmost, all must come out, but he put off the evil day to the last—a characteristic weakness—weakness or good policy, which was it?—that he had adopted ever since there had been evil days to fret about.

In the grey afternoon of an April day, he sat alone in his front parlour, more utterly dispirited than he had been since his wife's death, years ago. No good fortune had come either to father or son, and he was inclined to regard things in the future lugubriously; workhouses and parish funerals not being the least of his fancy sketches. He had taken his head between his hands, and was brooding very deeply before the scanty little fire-place, which he intended to heap up with coal a few minutes before Sidney's expected return, when Ann Packet came into the room, very confused, and speaking in a hoarse voice.

"If you please, sir, here's a visitor!"

"I can't see any visitors, Ann," he answered sharply, "unless—unless it's any one from——"

"It's only Mattie, sir; she's come to see you for a moment!"

"Mattie! bless my soul, has she turned up again?"

"She turned up at the front door only a minute ago. Lord bless her! You might have knocked me down with a straw, sir!"

"I'll see her—show her in."

Mattie came in the instant afterwards; the hall of the Hinchfords was not so spacious but that anything spoken in the front room would reach the ears of one waiting in the passage. She heard the answer, and entered at once.

"Well, Mattie, how are you?"

"Pretty well, I thank you, sir," was returned in the old brisk accents.

Mattie was not looking pretty well; on the contrary, very pale and thin, as though anxiety, or hard work, or both, had been her portion since she had left Great Suffolk Street. She was dressed in

black, very neatly dressed, and possibly the dark trappings had some effect in increasing the pallor of her countenance.

"We thought that we had lost you for good, Mattie."

"Was it likely, sir, that I was going to lose sight of all those who had been kind to me?"

"You're not looking very well," he said.

"Ah! we musn't judge by people's looks," said Mattie, cheerfully. "I'm well enough, thank God! And you, sir?"

"Well, Mattie, thank God, too!"

"And Sidney, sir?"

"As brave as ever. I wish he had been at home —he has been anxious to see you, Mattie."

"He is very kind," she said, in a low voice, adding, "and what does *he* think?"

Mr. Hinchford was not quick in catching a subject upon which Mattie had brooded now for some months.

"Think of what?"

"Of me! Mr. Wesden has—hasn't turned him against me, sir?"

"Oh! no. He sticks up for you like a champion!"

"I thought he would. He never spoke ill of any one in his life, and he always took the part of those who were unfortunate. I was sure he would not side against me!"

"Sit down, Mattie, sit down!"

"Thank you, no, sir! I shall never sit down in the house of any one who has heard ill news of me, until I can clear myself, or time clears me. I shall never go near Mr. Wesden's, although I feel for all the sorrow there."

"You know what has happened, then?"

"I have put on black, as for a lost mother. I was at the funeral, but they did not see me. Oh! sir, I know all about you—what should I do alone in the world, if I didn't think of those who *saved* me when I was young?"

"And what are you doing?"

"Getting my living by needlework, by artificial flower making, or by anything that's honest which falls in my way. I keep at work, and hunt about for work, and there are some good people, I find,

who take pity upon those situated like myself. I'm not afraid, sir, of doing well!"

"Glad to hear it, Mattie."

Mattie motioned Ann Packet to retire. Ann, who had been standing in the doorway all this time, open-mouthed and open-eared, withdrew at the hint. Mattie advanced and laid her hand upon Mr. Hinchford's arm.

"He goes there very often—they are engaged!"

Mr. Hinchford, who had always one thought uppermost, understood this at once—there was no necessity for any nominative cases—"Boy Sid" always understood!

"Yes."

"But he don't go to business now—the business is over."

"Who told you?"

"I read it in the paper a lodger lends me sometimes. Mr. Sidney's out of work!"

"At present—for a day or two."

"He has heard of something that will better him?"

"He will—in a day or two."

"And you—you're out of work too, sir?"

"That confounded Ann has told you——"

"Not a word, sir—but I have had a habit of looking for you, when you passed the house where I lodged, twice a-day—and I couldn't settle down, or feel comfortable, until you *had* passed. And when you did not come, I knew what had happened."

"Still full of curiosity, Mattie," said Mr. Hinchford, feeling the tears in his eyes at this evidence of Mattie's interest in him.

"Curious about all of you," she said, with a comprehensive gesture; "I don't feel so far away when I know what has happened, or is happening. And wanting to know the worst, or the best of everything, I come like an inquisitive little body, as I have always been, to take you by surprise like this!"

"But—but, my good girl, I can't tell you that we're very lucky just now. But Sid must not hear that I am getting very uncomfortable, and becoming less able to bear up as I ought to do, just to keep him strong, do you see? And if all goes on like

this much longer, both out of work, what will become of us? Oh! dear, dear, dear!—what a miserable old man I've been to him and myself, and everybody! Oh! to be comfortably out of the world, and a burden to no one!"

"Sir," said Mattie, earnestly, "a blessing to some. Don't you remember when you were stronger, being a blessing to me—you, my first friend! And don't you know that you're a blessing to that good son of yours, and that he thinks so, and loves you as he ought to do? You mustn't make him unhappy by giving way at this time."

"I don't give way before him, that's not likely. Strong as a rock, child!"

The rock shook and trembled from summit to base, but Mattie did not smile at the contrast which his words suggested.

"What are you doing for him now, sitting here, Mr. Hinchford, and trying to *look* your best?"

"Doing?—what can I do?"

"That's what I have been thinking about, sir.

When I'm at the flower-making—which I'm learning in over-time, because it don't pay just yet—I get, oh! such lots of time to think."

"Well?" he asked eagerly.

Mr. Hinchford always forgot disparity of age, and was content to be taught by Mattie, and receive advice from her. He wondered at it afterwards, but never when the spell of her presence was on him, when her young vigorous mind overpowered his weak efforts to rebel.

"Well, I have thought that Mr. Wesden, being a little—just a little—suspicious, would soon object to the engagement, if Mr. Sidney kept out of work too long. I can't say, for I don't perhaps understand Mr. Wesden, but it has been my idea; and oh! sir, they are so suited to each other, Harriet and he!"

"Well," he said again, "I don't think that Mr. Wesden's likely to object—but go on."

"And when I heard that the firm had failed, I began to wonder what he would do; for places are hard to get, even when one's clever now-a-days, and *has* a character to back him. And I wanted

to ask you if you had thought of your brother, sir?"

"Why—what do you know of my brother?"

"He came one night to Great Suffolk Street to see you—don't you remember? I knew him by his likeness to yourself, before I saw his name upon his card."

"My brother!"

Mr. Hinchford gave a tug to his stock; it had not struck him before, and its very absurdity rather amused him. His brother, who turned a deaf ear to his own plaints, when misfortune was fresh upon him—when that brother's help might have saved him, as he thought, from all the troubles and adversities which had oppressed him since their bitter quarrel.

"And he's a rich man—I have been asking about him—he's a banker, sir, and keeps a great many hands."

"Yes, yes, I know," he said impatiently; "but it's no good. I wouldn't ask a favour of him for the world. If it hadn't been for him, my old age would not be like this!"

"He's an old man—perhaps he's altered very much," suggested Mattie; "he might know something that would suit Mr. Sidney."

"Don't speak of him again," Mr. Hinchford said, with some severity.

"Very well, sir," was the sad response; "then I'll go now."

"Will you not wait till Sid comes back?—I'm sure he——"

"No, no, sir—I would rather not see him—I am pressed for time, and have a great deal to do when I get back. There's one thing more I came for, sir."

"What's that?"

"I want you to try and remember a letter which you gave me, when I went away from Great Suffolk Street."

"A letter—a letter—let me see!"

The old gentleman evidently did not remember anything about a letter; no letter had seen the light, or all had been explained between Harriet and Sidney, and the course of true love was running smoothly to the end. So much the better; it was

as well to say no more about it, Mattie thought. If the letter were lost, the old gentleman might only create suspicion by alluding to it upon Sidney's return; Mattie did not know how far to trust him.

She went away a few minutes afterwards, stopping for awhile to exchange greetings with Ann Packet, to whom she gave her address—a back street in Southwark Bridge Road—after much adjuration.

"You won't mind me, my dear," said Ann, "now you're settled down to something—but, oh! dear, how thin you've got. You've been fretting all the flesh off your precious bones."

"I haven't fretted much, Ann," was Mattie's answer; "you know I never liked to do anything but make the best of it. And I've not tried in vain—all will come right again—I'm sure of it!"

"And the worst is over—ain't it?"

"To be sure, the very worst. And now don't tell my address to anyone—not to Mr. Sidney or Miss Harriet especially."

"But Miss Harriet——"

"Will only offend her father by coming to see

me—you, Ann, won't offend any one very much."

"Ony a poor stray like yourself, Mattie—am I?"

"And our hearts don't stray very far from those we have loved, Ann—and never will."

"Ah! she talks like a book almost—the sight of learning that that child got hold on, and the deal of good she does a body," muttered Ann, looking after Mattie through the misty twilight stealing up the street.

"For every one her liked, and every one her loved," wrote Spenser, ages ago, of his heroine—Ann Packet might have quoted the same words, barring all thoughts of Mr. Wesden, whom the force of events had turned aside from Mattie.

Mr. Hinchford liked Mattie; her presence had brightened him up, given a shake to ideas that had been rusting of late.

"She's a quick girl," he muttered, "but she has the most foolish and out-of-the-way thoughts. How she disturbs one—I meant to have asked her seriously, and yet kindly, why she stopped out all night, and offended Mr. Wesden. Odd I should

forget that—I don't generally let things slip my memory in that ridiculous fashion. And about that man who called himself her father—why, I forgot that, too!—God bless me! A curious girl—my brother, indeed!—my hard-hearted and unsympathetic brother!"

CHAPTER IV.

HIS TURN!

MR. HINCHFORD did not forget the foolish and out-of-the-way thought of Mattie's. It has been already said that his memory was retentive enough in all things that affected his son's welfare, and the new suggestion kept his mind busy as the days stole on, and Sidney brought back his cheerful face but no good news with him.

The old man's pride had kept him aloof from the brother for many years; he had been hurt by that brother's coldness, and he had resolved to show that he was able to work his own way in life, without that assistance which he had once solicited. He had kept his word; for his own sake it had been easy, but, for his son's, there was

a temptation he could scarcely withstand. There might be a chance, there might not be; in his heart, he thought the odds were against Sid. He did not set much value upon the brother's visit to Great Suffolk Street; it might have been curiosity, or a spasm of affection which had rendered him eccentric for a day; he remembered his brother simply as a hard, inflexible being who, having formed an opinion, closed upon it with a snap, and was ever after that immovable. Still for Sidney's sake he thought at last that he would try. It should not be said of him that he neglected one chance to benefit his son, or that his pride stood in the way of Sid's advancement—that queer girl, whom he could scarcely make out, should not say that he had not done his best for Sidney.

He dressed himself in his best suit one day, seized his stick, and marched down to Camberwell Green, whence he took the omnibus to the City. Sidney had again departed in quest of "something" —on a visit to the news-rooms to search the papers there—and Mr. Hinchford was following in his wake shortly afterwards.

He had a nervous fear that he should meet Sidney in the City, at first, but the crowd which surrounded him there assured him that that event was not likely to ensue. He had not been in the City for many years and the place alarmed him; he almost guessed how weak and nervous he had become when he struggled with the mob of money-hunters in King William Street, and found it hard to fight against.

"All these hunting for places in one shape or another," he thought, "looking but for the best chance, and greedy of any one who gets in the way, and seems likely to deprive them of it, or add to their expenses. Why, where's all the places that hold these men and keep my Sid doing nothing?"

He turned into the narrow lanes branching out of the great thoroughfare leading to the Bank, and proceeded without any difficulty to the banking-house of his brother Geoffry. His memory was not in fault here; every short cut through the shady by-ways of the City he took by instinct—he had banked with his brother in days gone by, and it

was like retracing his youthful steps to find himself once more in these old streets.

Before the swing glass doors of a quiet, old-fashioned banking-house he paused, changed the stick from his right hand to his left, gave a little tug to his stock, changed hands again with his stick, finally crossed over the way, and set his back against the dingy wall opposite. The pride which had held him aloof so long from his brother rose up again, that ruling passion which a struggling life had circumscribed. He became very red in the face, and looked almost fiercely at the banking-house in front of him. He felt that his brother would say "No" again, and the humiliation in store he should have courted by his own folly. But Sidney?—possibly Sidney might be of service there, and room found for him, if he asked; and if not; still, for Sidney's sake, he must attempt it—courage and forward!

Mr. Hinchford nerved himself to the task, crossed the road, and went up the steps into the bank. They were busy before and behind the counters there; money was being shovelled in and

out of drawers; cheques were flying across the counter; there was the stir and bustle of a first-class banking-house before him; everybody was talking, whispering, studying, and thinking of money; what room for any sentiment in that place from nine till four?

He took his place by the counter, waiting to address one of the clerks at the first convenient opportunity that might present itself; he was in no hurry; he wished to collect his thoughts, and arrange his plan of action; and instead of arranging auy plan, he looked at the clerks, and thought Sidney Hinchford might as well have a place behind that counter as not—and how well he would look there, and what a good place for him it would be!

He stood there for a considerable time, until his presence began to oppress a bald-headed young man at the third desk, an energetic young man of uncivil appearance—soured in life perhaps, by his hair coming off so early—who, in the hurry of business, had taken little notice of Mr. Hinchford until then.

"What is it?" he asked, abruptly.

Mr. Hinchford objected to abruptness, and felt it hard to be snubbed by his brother's clerk to begin with. He reddened a little, and said that he wished to see Mr. Hinchford directly.

"Mr. Hinchford!" the clerk repeated; "oh! you can't see either of *them!*"

"Just ask, young man, and don't answer for your master!"

"If it's anything about an account, Mr. Maurice will, if you've a proper introduction, at——"

"Mr. Maurice will not do, sir!" cried Mr. Hinchford; "go and tell my brother directly that I wish to see him, if you please."

There was some pride in claiming brotherhood with the banker, even under the difficulties before him; the effect upon the uncivil bank clerk—why are bank clerks uncivil in the aggregate?—was bewildering; he stared at Mr. Hinchford, detected the likeness at once, and backed from the counter on the instant. Mr. Hinchford saw no more of him—he was beginning to think that his message had not been delivered after all, when a young man behind touched him on the arm.

"Will you please to step this way?"

Mr. Hinchford turned, followed the usher to the end of the counting-house, passed through a room, where two or three gentlemen were busily writing, went through another door into a larger room, where one old gentleman—very like himself—was seated in all the divinity that doth hedge a principal.

"Good morning, James," was the banker's first remark, nodding his head familiarly in his brother's direction.

"Good morning, Geoffry."

And then there was a pause; the two men who had parted in anger nearly twenty-six years ago, and had not met since, looked at each other somewhat curiously. It was a strange meeting, and a strange commencement thereto, a little affected on the part of the banker, the senior by eight years. In the same room together, the likeness between them was singularly apparent—the height, figure, features, even the scanty crop of white hair, were all identical; but in the senior's face there was expressed a vigour and determination, which in Sid's father was wholly wanting. Geoffry Hinchford was still the

cool, calculating man of business, who let no chance slip, and who fought for his chances, and held his place with younger men.

There was no sentiment in the meeting of the brothers, and yet each was moved and touched by the changes time had made. They had parted in the prime of life, stalwart, handsome men, and they came face to face in their senility.

"Take a seat," said Geoffry Hinchford, indicating one with the feather of the quill pen he held in his hand.

The brother took a chair with a grave inclination of the head, and then crossed his hands upon his stick, and began to evidence a little of that nervousness that had beset him before he entered the banking-house. Geoffry Hinchford's keen eyes detected this, and he hastened to avoid one of those scenes which he had confessed to his nephew he hated, when he made his first and last call in Great Suffolk Street.

"You have been walking fast, James; will you look at the *Times* a bit, and compose yourself. *That's* the money article."

He passed the paper over to his brother, and then began making a few entries in a small pocket volume before him—a hybrid book, with a lock and key. Mr. Hinchford turned the paper over in his hands, inspected the money article upside down, and appeared interested in it from that point of view—gave a furtive tug to his stock, which he was sure Sid, who always buttoned it, had taken in a hole too much, and then mustered up courage to begin the subject which had brought him thither.

"Geoffry, it's six-and-twenty years or so since I sat in this very place and asked a favour of you."

"Ah! thereabouts," responded Geoffry from over his private volume.

"Which was refused," added the old gentleman.

"Of course it was."

"Ahem."

Mr. Hinchford cleared his throat with some violence. He did not like this method of receiving his first remarks; it warmed his blood after the old

fashion, and, what was better, it cleared off his nervousness.

"One would think that I had got over asking favours of a brother who had proved himself so hard——"

"No," interrupted Geoffry, "not hard—but go on."

"And yet I am here again to ask a second favour, and chance as curt a denial."

"Ah! I did hope, James, that you were here to say 'I was in the wrong to take myself off in a huff, because my brother would not let me fling some of his money after my own,' or, at least to say, 'Glad to see you, Geoffry, and hope to see you more often after this,'—but *favours!*"

"Not for myself, sir," said Mr. Hinchford, hastily; "don't mistake me—I wouldn't ask a favour for myself to save my life."

"I would to save a shilling; I often do."

"That is the difference between us," Mr. Hinchford answered.

"Exactly the difference. Pray proceed, Jem."

The younger brother softened at the old appella-

tive; he composed his ruffled feathers, and went at it more submissively.

"Look here, Geoffry, I ask a favour for my son. His firm has dissolved partnership——"

"What firm was it?"

Mr. Hinchford told him.

"Smashed, you mean—bad management somewhere—go on."

"And he, who would have been made partner in his twenty-first birthday, has now to begin the world afresh. I thought that you might know of something suitable for him, and would, remembering our common name, do something for him."

"He's a tetchy young gentleman—what I remember of him, in a flying visit. Who the deuce can he take after, I wonder?" and the banker appeared to cudgel his brains with his pen, as if lost in perplexity as to any trait in the Hinchfords identical with "tetchiness." The father did not detect the irony—perhaps would not at that juncture.

"Well," said the banker, "what general abilities has he?"

Mr. Hinchford burst forth at once. The wrongs of the past were forgotten; the theme was a pleasant one; the abilities of his son were manifold; he could testify to them for the next two hours, if a patient listener were found him. He launched forth into a list of Sid's accomplishments, and grew eloquent upon his son's genius for figures, adaptability for commercial pursuits, his energy, and industry in all things, at all times and seasons.

"This lad ought to be governor of the Bank of England," Geoffry Hinchford broke in with, "there's nothing suitable for such extraordinary accomplishments here. I can only place him at the bottom of the clerks, with a salary of a hundred and twenty to begin with."

"Geoffry, you're very kind," ejaculated his brother; "you mean that—you will really do something for us, after all?"

"Why, you vexatious and frivolous old man," cried the banker, exasperated at last, "I would have always helped you in my own way, if you had not been so thoroughly set upon my helping you in

yours. You were hot-headed, and I was ill-tempered and *raspish*, and so we quarrelled, and you—you, my only brother—sulked with me for six and twenty years. For shame, sir!"

The banker evinced a little excitement here; he tossed his pen aside and beat his thin fingers on the book; he spoke his mind out, and amazed his brother sitting at a little distance from him.

"Geoffry—I—I didn't sulk exactly. But you were a rich man, and I was left poor; and if you remember, when I came here last I——"

"If I listen any more to that story, I'm damned!" cried the banker; "it's dangerous ground, and if we get upon it, we shall begin sparring again. Now, sir—look here."

He stood up, and began laying down the law with the fingers of his right hand in the palm of his left.

"I swallowed my pride by coming to Great Suffolk Street in search of you—that was my turn. We were to sink the past, and be friends, I thought; we two foolish old septuagenarians, with nothing to quarrel about. You swallowed your

pride—a larger pill than mine, Jem, for it nearly choked you in the attempt—by coming here, and now it's your turn—eh? "

He held forth both his hands suddenly towards his brother, who answered the appeal by placing his own within them, and holding them in a nervous trembling grasp.

"Amen!" said the banker; and the younger and weaker man understood what he meant, and felt the tears in his eyes.

"And now, I have heard a great deal of your son—you shall see mine."

He left his brother, touched a hand-bell, and a servant immediately responded.

"Ask Mr. Maurice to step here a moment."

"Yes, sir."

Exit servant; enter very quickly a tall young man of about thirty years of age, fresh-coloured, well formed, with curly brown hair, and a long brown moustache, "making tracks," as the Americans say, for his shoulders.

"Maurice, here's your obstinate uncle come to see us at last."

"I am glad to see *you*, sir—I think the difference has lasted long enough."

Uncle and nephew shook hands—Mr. Hinchford thought this nephew was a fine young fellow enough—not like his Sid, but a very passable and presentable young fellow notwithstanding.

"We're going to try your cousin as a clerk, Maurice. Any objection?"

"Not in the least," was the ready answer.

"We shall not claim relationship over the ledgers," intimated Geoffry Hinchford; "if he's clever, he'll get on—if he's a fool, he'll get the sack. And we don't expect him, after the general fashion of relations, to cry out, 'See how my uncle and cousin are serving me, their own flesh and blood, by not lifting me over the heads of the staff, and making my fortune at once!'"

"Sid wants no favours, sir," said Mr. Hinchford, sharply.

"After office hours we shall remember that he's a Hinchford, perhaps," said the banker. "Send him when you like, James."

"To-morrow, Geoffry, if you will."

"He's sure to come, I suppose?" asked his brother. "Is he aware of your visit here to-day?"

"No."

"Ah! then it's doubtful, I think. By Gad! I shan't forget in a hurry his sermon to me, and his flourish of trumpets over his own independence."

"He will come, sir, I think."

"Out of place makes a difference," remarked the banker; "we shall see. And now, what can I do for you, James?"

"Oh! nothing, nothing," he said hastily; "I ask no favours for myself—I'm doing well, thank you—very well indeed! Where's my stick and hat? I—I think I'll bid you good morning now, Geoffry."

"I shall see you again, I daresay—I can always send a message to you by your son, who will be here to-morrow, perhaps. Good-bye, old fellow—Maurice, see to your uncle."

Maurice Hinchford, noticing the feeble steps of the new relation, offered his arm, which was declined by a hasty shake of the head.

"I'm strong enough, sir—but the meeting has upset me just a little. Geoffry," turning back to address his brother, "we won't say anything more about that old affair—I think you meant well, after all."

"I hope I did. Good day."

"Good day, brother."

Maurice closed the door behind his uncle.

"He's getting quite the old man," said Mr. Hinchford to his nephew; "he had an iron nerve once. He seems very feeble to me—does he enjoy good health?"

"Oh! first rate health—he's a strong man for his age, Mr. Hinchford. Don't you think so?"

"Perhaps he is. You can't expect him like myself, eight years younger than he."

"Well, no," said the nephew, drily.

"He ought not to worry himself about business at his age—why, I have given it up myself," he added.

"Oh! indeed!"

Business had given him up; but the old man did not think of it that moment. He was anxious to

show the Hinchfords in the best light possible, lest Sid should be looked down upon too much when he came to his new berth.

"And your father must feel the cares of business a little?"

"Not a bit," said Maurice; "he wouldn't be happy out of the bank! He's strong and well, thank God, and one of the best-hearted men and fathers in the world. Too good a father, by half, for that matter!"

"How's that?"

"Oh! it's difficult to explain," was the answer of the nephew, whose cheeks flushed a little at the question; "you'll excuse me now, uncle. Through here and straight across the office—good day."

He shook hands with Mr. Hinchford, and left him at the door of the inner office which the old gentleman had passed through half an hour since, less hopeful of good fortune in store for the Boy!

CHAPTER V.

"THE NEW BERTH."

MR. HINCHFORD scarcely maintained an equable demeanour until Sidney's return; the burden of good news was almost too much for him, and just to wile away the time, and experience the blessed privilege of telling a good story twice, he found out Ann Packet and enlightened her as to the new chance that was presented to Sid.

When Sidney returned, and informed his father that there was no news, Mr. Hinchford bade him not despair, for good luck was sure to turn up in one direction or another.

"Despair!" cried Sidney, cheerfully; "why, I haven't dreamed of despairing yet! Is it likely?"

"Shall I tell you some bad news, Sid?"

"Out with it!"

Mr. Hinchford detailed his dismissal from service at the builder's office. Sidney looked a little discomfited at first, but clapped his father on the shoulder heartily.

"We can bear it—you and I together. You'll be better away from business, and have your health better. I shall be strong enough for the two of us, sir."

"Good lad—but if nothing turns up."

"Oh! but it will!"

"And, oh! but it has!" cried the father; "now for the good news, Sid, which I have been keeping back till it has nearly burst me."

Mr. Hinchford exploded with his confession, and Sidney listened not unmoved at it. In his heart he had grown dispirited, though not despondent, and the news was grateful to him, and took a load therefrom which had seemed to become a little heavier every day. He would have preferred a clerkship away from his relation's office; but his pride was not so great as his common sense, and he saw the advantages which might accrue to him from an earnest application to business. He

remembered, with a slight feeling of discomfort, his past hauteur to the man from whom he now accepted service; but he had had a fall since then, and the hopes of that time—with one bright exception—had been bubble-blown, and met the fate of bubbles. He had been too sanguine; now he was matter-of-fact, and must proceed coolly to work. He had ten years to work in—what would be the end of them? His heart had sunk a little; upon cool reflection he began to doubt whether he had acted well in confiscating the affections of one to whom he might never be able to offer a home.

Still he judged Harriet Wesden by himself, and judged her rightly. If she loved him for himself, she would not care what money he brought her; and if his affection were selfish, knowing what an end to a love story his life must be, he had concealed nothing from her, and the truth had only drawn her closer to him. He felt that that was his one hope, and he could not be magnanimous enough to insist upon its dissolution, and of the unfitness of his prospects to her own. When the time came round

and left him penniless; or when he saw, three or four years hence, that there was no chance of saving money, and he remained still the clerk with an income that increased not, it would be time to resign her—not now, when she loved him, and he was happy in her smiles, and understood her, as he thought, so well.

He entered upon his novitiate at his uncle's banking-house; his father had not reiterated the hint which Geoffry Hinchford had given him about relationship, but Sid was a young man who knew his place, and who kept it, and rather shunned his relations than forced himself upon them.

Uncle and nephew proved themselves very different beings to what Sidney had imagined; they were kind to him in their way—they were even anxious he should do the family name credit; they watched his progress, and were quick enough to see that he would prove a valuable and energetic auxiliary.

Geoffry Hinchford was pleased at his nephew's reticence, and took note of it as he had taken note

of most things during his earthly pilgrimage. He even condescended to give him a little advice in the shape of a warning one day.

"Sidney," he said, when chance brought them together in that bank back parlour, "how do you like your cousin Maurice for a master?"

"He is very kind to me."

"Ah! that's it—that's his fault. When I'm gone, I have a fear that he will make a muddle of the bank with his easiness. He's the best son that ever lived, I think, but he's too easy."

Sidney did not consider himself warranted in replying to this.

"So take my advice, Sidney, and steer clear of him as much as you can," he said.

"I don't think that the advice is needed, sir. Our position—"

"Fiddle-de-dee—he never cared for position, and, unfortunately, he's taken a fancy to you. The scamp wanted to double your salary yesterday, without any rhyme or reason, only relationship. Foolish, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't deserve any increase of salary yet,

sir—it has not been fairly earned," was the frank answer.

"Exactly—now listen to me. I think it is just possible that Mr. Maurice may forget that your salary is small, and that you have a father to keep. Let me tell you that he is an expensive acquaintance, and a little removed from your sphere."

"I know it, sir."

"Some day it may be different—we can't tell what may happen, but take care of him for awhile. A noble young fellow, a good business man in business hours, but not calculated to improve your mercantile abilities by a closer acquaintance."

Sidney Hinchford considered the warning somewhat of a strange one, and even for awhile did his uncle the half-injustice to believe that he spoke more in fear of Maurice "lowering" himself, than on account of his nephew forming expensive acquaintances. But Sid soon found the warning worth attending to. It happened, at times, that Sidney Hinchford had extra work after the bank was closed, and the majority of clerks had departed. His cousin Maurice, who always remained long

after his father had gone—he rented apartments in London, whilst his father went off by train every afternoon to Red-Hill—did occasionally, in the early days of their acquaintance, come to Sid's desk and watch his labours for a few minutes, very intently.

"What are you going to do with yourself to-night, Sidney?"

"I am going home, Mr. Maurice."

"Come and dine with me at my club, and take pity upon my loneliness."

"Thank you—but my father will be expecting me home."

"Oh! the governor can't expect you, at your age, to be always turning up to five o'clock teas."

"You must excuse me, if you please."

"Well, if you'll give me one plain answer to the next question, I won't press it."

"I'll give it you."

"Isn't there a young lady your way, as well as the governor?"

"Yes," was the quick answer.

"By Jove! if I didn't think so. Ah! you're a

gay deceiver, Sidney, after the bank doors have closed upon you."

On another occasion, and under similar circumstances, he said, in a quick, abrupt way, that almost bordered on embarrassment—

"Has your father any property of his own?"

"No."

"Your salary supports yourself and him entirely?"

"Yes, and leaves something to spare."

Maurice whistled, took up a lead pencil on Sidney's desk, and began scribbling with it on his finger nails. Suddenly he laid the pencil down, saying—

"Oh! that's a thundering sight too bad, old fellow!—we're all Hinchfords, and must alter that. How are you going to marry?—and when?"

"In the usual fashion—and in ten years' time."

"That's an engagement that will never come to anything, then."

"How do you know?"

"Because long engagements seldom do—and no

man, to my fancy, has a right to tie a girl down to such horrible agreements."

"It can't be helped, Maurice," said Sid, a little sadly.

"I'd start in some business. Are you too proud for trade?"

"I don't care about retail—selling ha'porths of something across the counter, wearing white aprons, and so on," replied Sidney; "it's very wrong of me, but it's the Hinchford pride that bars the way, I suppose."

"Try wholesale on a small scale, as a start—the old tea business, for instance."

"Don't you think that I am fit for this, Mr. Maurice?"

"Yes, but it takes time to rise, and you mean marrying. Now, to my fancy, you are a man who would do better in commerce."

"Ah! but then there's capital to sink by way of a beginning."

"I can lend you a thousand pounds—a couple of thousands. I'm a very saving man, Sidney—

I'm as certain that you would pay me back again as that I'm standing here."

"You're very kind," murmured Sidney, taken aback by this liberal offer; "but—but, it can't be done."

"Borrow it from my father and me—as your bankers, if you will. My father will not say no to it, I fancy—and if he does, why, there's the other resource just alluded to."

Sidney was still bewildered, and at a loss to account for the offer. For an instant he was even tempted; there rose before him the one chance of his life, the happiness of his life with Harriet, forestalled by years—and then he put his hands out, as though to push all dangerous thoughts away.

"Thank you—thank you—" he said; "but when I speculate, it must be with my own money. I will not start in life burdened by a heavy debt. You're very kind—far too kind to me, sir."

"A Hinchford—I never forget that. You don't know how proud I am of my family, and all its belongings. And, joking apart, Sidney, we really

are a fine family, every one of us! And you'll not—well, subject postponed, *sine die;* the bank isn't such a bad place, and we shall give a lift to your salary when you deserve it. Not before, mind," he added, with a seriousness that made Sidney smile, who remembered the anecdote related by the senior partner.

Sidney Hinchford was touched by his rich cousin's efforts to promote his interests, by his frankness, his *bonhomie.* Though he held himself aloof from him, yet he respected, even admired him. There was not a man in the banking-office who did not admire Mr. Maurice Hinchford; he had a good word for even the porter; he treated his servants liberally; he was always ready to promote their interests; the cares of money-making, and taking care of other people's money, had never soured his temper, or brought a dark look to his face.

This was the father's anxiety, that Maurice was too easy—that nothing put him out of temper, or chased away the smiles from his good-looking countenance; the banker was glad to see his son happy, but he did

wish now and then that Maurice had looked at life less frivolously, and been more staid and sober in his ways. The banker was glad to see him generous—although, if the fit seized him, Maurice was a trifle too liberal with his cheques, for natural wants, bequests, and monuments; but he was not a spendthrift, and even put money by, from the princely share of the profits which he received twice a year.

Certainly it would have been difficult for a single man to run through it without sheer gambling at green tables, or on green turfs; and Maurice Hinchford never betted on the red and black, and hated horsy people. He spent all the money a man *could* honestly get through; he fared sumptuously every day, and dressed figuratively in purple and fine linen; it was his boast that he had the best of everything around him, and anything second-rate had been his abomination from a child; he was a Sybarite, to whom luck had been wafted, and he enjoyed life, and cared not for the morrow, on the true Sybarite principle. But he was not a proud man; he was fastidious in a few things—young ladies of his circle generally, and the mothers

of those young ladies especially, thought him *much* too fastidious—but he was a man whom men and women of all classes liked, and whom his servants idolized.

It was no wonder that his pleasant manners had their effect upon Sidney, who had found few of his own sex to admire in the world, and who knew that the man of whose energy everyone spoke well was of his own kith and kin. He held himself aloof, knowing that his ways were not Maurice's ways. When the rich cousin once asked why he so rigidly refused every offer to join him at his club, to make one of a little party at the opera, sharing his box with him, and put to no expense save a dress-coat and white choker, he confessed the reason in his old straightforward manner.

"You're too well-off for me—I can't be your companion, and I'll not be patronized and play the toady. It looks bad in business here, and it will look worse apart from it."

"You're a regular stoic!"

After awhile Mr. GeoffryHinchford again asked his nephew what he thought of Maurice.

"A warm-hearted and a generous man, whom I am proud to think is a cousin of mine."

"Yes—just as you say. And very proud I am, too, to think that this dashing handsome young fellow is a son of mine. He has all the virtues except one, under heaven, Sidney."

"We're not all perfect, sir," said Sidney, laughing.

"Oh! but you are, according to my brother James—he won't see even a flaw in your armour," said the old banker, acrimoniously; "but then he always was aggravating me with something or other—and now it's you."

"I hope not, sir."

"Well, well, only in one sense of the word. And Maurice has, after all, but a little foible, which the world—the real, material world—always makes allowance for. He will grow out of it. Good evening."

Sidney did not inquire concerning Maurice Hinchford's foibles, little or otherwise—he knew that foibles were common to humanity, and that humanity is lenient respecting them. He did not

believe that there was any great wrong likely to affect the brilliancy of Maurice Hinchford's character—he would be content to resemble his cousin, he thought, if he were ever a rich man like unto him, an honest, amiable English gentleman.

Sidney did not covet his cousin's riches, however; he knew that fortune was not reserved for him, and if he were scarcely content with his lot in life, he was at least thankful for all mercies that had been vouchsafed to him, though he kept his thanks to himself for the greater part.

"If he were scarcely content!" we have said, for Sidney was ambitious of rising by his own merits in the world; a laudable ambition, for which we need not upbraid him. He was careful of his money, a characteristic from his boyhood, a trait that his father, who had been never careful, took great pains to develop. He sank his pride completely for the sake of saving money, and he did save a little, despite the small income, the housekeeping expenditure, and his father to support. On Saturday nights he toiled home from the cheapest market with a huge bag of groceries,

to the disgust of the suburban tea-dealer—who wanted a hundred per cent. profit on an indifferent article—and walked with his head rather higher in the air than usual when heavily laden.

"When I can afford it, the goods shall be brought to my door," he said, when his father once urged a faint remonstrance; "but I can't study appearances on a hundred and fifty pounds a year. Those fellow-clerks of mine can drop my acquaintance on a Saturday night, and pass by on the other side, if they are inclined. I shall carry my big parcels and exult in my independence all the same."

"Yes, but the look of the thing, Sid."

"We'll study that some day, if we have the chance. *We must keep our eyes open*, till the chance comes."

"I did think once that you had all the Hinchford pride in you, Sid."

"I have a fair share, sir," was the answer, "and I never feel prouder than when I am carrying my plethoric bag under my arm. Proud of myself, and of the property I have invested in."

"Then I don't see why I should complain."

"You—to be sure not. Put on your hat, and let us go round to Mr. Wesden's, and make up our whist party."

And in this quiet way—winding up the evenings with whist-playing and love-making—the time stole on.

END OF BOOK THE FOURTH.

BOOK V.

STORM SIGNALS.

CHAPTER I.

CAST DOWN.

MEANWHILE Mattie, the stray, must absorb our attention for awhile. In following the fortunes of the Hinchfords, we have omitted to watch closely the progress of our heroine. Yes, our heroine—if we have not called attention to that fact before—and with many first-class "heroinical" qualities, which would do credit to the high-born damsels of our old-fashioned novels. She had been heroine enough to make a sacrifice for Harriet Wesden; to take an unfair share of blame for Harriet's sake, and, therefore, she ranks as "first-lady" in this romance of business-life. She had made the sacrifice of her good name—for it amounted to that—with a sharp struggle; but then she would have given up her life for those to whom

her better nature had taught her to be grateful. The girl's love for all who had rescued her from the evil of the past was ever intense, led her to strange actions, kept her hovering in the distance round the friends she had had once. Hers was a nature strangely susceptible to affection, and that affection was not uprooted because ill-report set its stigma upon her. Hers was a forgiving nature, also, and she thought even kindly of Mr. Wesden when the first shock was over, and she had judged him by that true character which she understood so well.

In her new estate Mattie was not happy; she was alone in the world, and we know that she was partial to society, and not always disinclined to hear the sound of her own musical voice. But she was not disconsolate; she made the best of her bad bargain, and set to work, in her humble way, with something of that doggedness of purpose, for which her friend Sidney was remarkable. She had struggled hard for a living, but had never given way. She had met obstacles in her path, which would have crushed the energy out of most wo-

men, but which she surmounted, not without wounds and loss of strength, and even health, and then went on again. She was matter-of-fact and honest, and those who had doubted her at first —for she had chosen her dwelling-place but a very little way from Great Suffolk Street, and the rumours of a lying tongue followed her, and set her neighbours and fellow-lodgers against her— soon understood her, for the poor are great observers and good judges of character.

In the poor neighbourhood wherein she had settled down, she asked for advice as to the best method of leading an honest life, and received it from her landlady. She turned dress-maker, and when customers came not with a grand rush to Tenchester Street, she asked if she might learn her landlady's business, artificial flower-making, and offered her services gratuitously, until it pleased her mistress to see that she was the handiest "help" she possessed. Then her health failed, for she worked hard, lived hard, and had hard thoughts to contend with; and when the doctor told her sedentary pursuits would not agree with her, she went

a step lower for awhile, and even sold play-bills at the doors of a minor theatre to keep the wolf from *her* door.

Mattie had one fear of seeing her money melt away to the last farthing, and being left in the world penniless and friendless, as in the days of her desolate childhood. She had no fear of temptation besetting her in her poverty—for ever she was above that—but she did not wish to die poor, to seek the workhouse, or to be reminded in any way of her past estate. She *would* be above that; she was ever hoping to show Mr. Wesden that she was honest and respected, she struggled vehemently against the tide, and earned her own living at least, varying the mode very often as her quick wits suggested; but never idle, and rising or sinking with the seasons, as they proved fair or sharp ones with the working classes.

It had been a fair season when she called on Mr. Hinchford last, and she had even found courage to give Ann Packet her address; the sharp season set in after that, and, though Ann Packet in her monthly visits was deceived by Mattie's manner,

yet it became another struggle for bread with our heroine. For the season was not only sharp, but Mattie gave way in health over her work for a rascally waistcoat-maker, who drove hard bargains, and did not believe in Charity covering a multitude of sins. And with an opposition clothier over the way, who sported a glass chandelier, and sold fancy vests for three and sixpence, it *was* hard to believe in anything.

Mattie gave way more than she intended to acknowledge to Ann Packet, had not that indefatigable young woman made her appearance unexpectedly, and found Mattie in bed at six in the evening.

"Good lor! what's this?"

"Nothing, Ann—only a little cold, which I have been recommended to nurse for a-day," said Mattie; "don't look so scared!"

"But why wasn't I to know it?—I might have brought in something good for you," bemoaned Ann; "if I'm to be kep in the dark, who's to take care of you, my gal?"

"I am taking very good care of myself, Ann."

"What *are* you taking?"

"Oh! all manner of things—won't you believe me?"

"No—I won't."

And Ann proceeded to inspect mantel-pieces, open cupboards and drawers, to Mattie's dismay.

"Yes, I see just how it be," she said, after her search had resulted in nothing satisfactory. "You're working yourself to death, and starving yourself to death, without saying anything to anybody. And that's gratitude for all my love for you—you who want to leave me alone in the world, with not no one to love."

"Why, my dear Ann, I'm not going to die."

"You're trying all you can—oh! you ungrateful gal!"

Mattie defended herself, and maintained that it was only one "lay up," but Ann Packet did not like the red spot on each cheek, the unnatural brightness of the eyes, and secretly doubted her assertion.

"I must go back now. I shall come to-morrow, first thing."

"I shall be well enough to-morrow, Ann."

Ann Packet kissed her and departed; half-an-hour afterwards, to Mattie's astonishment, she made her reappearance, accompanied by a tall, slim gentleman.

"There's the gal, sir. Now, please tell me what's the matter, and don't mind *her* a bit."

Mattie saw that it was too late to offer a resistance, and refrained, like a wise young woman, from "making a scene." The doctor felt her pulse, looked at her tongue, took the light from the table and held it close to Mattie's face.

"Well—what's the matter, sir?" was Mattie's question.

"Humph! don't know that I can tell exactly, yet. I'll look in to-morrow."

"No, don't do that," said Mattie, alarmed at the expense.

"Yes, do," cried Ann Packet, "your money's safe, sir. Look to me at 34 Chesterfield Terrace, Camberwell, for it. I'm a respectable maid-of-all-work, with money in the bank."

"It's of no consequence," muttered the doctor;

but he entered the address in his note-book, like a man of business as he was.

"Shan't I be well to-morrow, sir?" asked Mattie, anxiously.

"Humph!—scarcely to-morrow, I think."

"Why don't you say what it is?—do you think I'm likely to be frightened at it, even if it's death, sir? Why, I've lived down all fright at anything long ago."

"It's a little attack of scarlatina, I think," he answered, thus adjured.

"You only think?"

"Well, then, I'm sure."

"She's had it afore, you know," Ann Packet suggested, "when she was a child. I thought people couldn't have these nasty things twice."

"Oh! yes."

"That's enough, then," said Ann Packet, taking off her bonnet and shawl, and putting them on the table as centre ornaments; "here I sticks till you're better."

"Ann—Ann Packet!" cried Mattie.

"Ah! you may say what you like, I shan't move.

When this gentleman's gone, we'll quarrel about it —not afore."

The gentleman alluded to took his departure, promising to send round some medicine in a few minutes. Mattie looked imploringly at the obdurate Ann.

"You *must* go home, Ann."

"Not a bit of it, my dear," said Ann; "I have knowed you for too long a time to leave you in the lurch like this, for all the places in the world. And it isn't that I haven't knowed the Hinchfords long enough, to think they'll mind."

Mattie sighed.

"But you keep quiet, my dear, and fancy I'm your mother taking care on you—which I wish I was. And I'll send a boy to Camberwell to tell 'em why I ain't a coming back just yet."

"Let me write a——"

"Let you keep yourself quiet, and don't worry me. I'm going to manage you through this."

"You're very good, Ann," said Mattie; "but if you catch the fever of me!"

"Lor bless you! I shan't catch no fever—I'm

too old for changing colour, my dear. You might as well expect buff-leather to catch fevers. But don't you remember how skeered I was once when you came in piping hot with it from Kent Street? Ah! I was vain of my good looks then, and afraid they might be spiled."

Ann Packet had been a girl with a bat-catching-against-wall kind of countenance all her life, but distance lent enchantment to the view of the merry days when she was young. And Ann Packet's will was absolute, and carried all before it. Mattie was bowed down by it; she felt weaker than usual, and too ill to assert supremacy in her own house. Giving up, she thought that it was comfortable to have a friend at her side, and to feel that the loneliness of a few hours since was hers no longer.

Ann Packet went down-stairs, and found a boy prepared—for twopence down and twopence when he came back—to deliver any message within a radius of fifty miles from Tenchester Street. The messenger departed, returning, in due course, with a favourable, even a kind reply. Ann Packet was

to take her own time, and a girl would be found to assist until Mattie was better. Mattie read the note to Ann.

"There, didn't I say so?"

"It's in Mr. Sidney's handwriting," said Mattie, putting the letter under her pillow; "he's always kind and thoughtful."

"Ah! he is."

"As kind and thoughtful as ever, I suppose, Ann?"

"Lor bless you!—yes."

"What a long while it seems since——"

"Since you've held *your* tongue," added Ann. "Yes, it does. I'd keep quiet a bit now, if I was you."

Thus adjured, Mattie relapsed into silence, and Ann Packet, thinking her charge was asleep, stole out of the room a short while afterwards, and went into the streets marketing. In the night the fever gained apace with our heroine; the next day the doctor pronounced her worse—enjoined strict quietness and care.

"He seems afraid of me," said Mattie, after he

had gone, "as if there were anything to be alarmed at, even if I did die. Why, what could be better for me, Ann?"

"Oh! don't—oh! don't."

"Not that I am going to die—I don't feel like it," said Mattie. "I can see myself getting strong again, and fighting," she added, with a little shudder, "my battles again. There, Ann, you need not look so scared; I won't die to please you."

It was a forced air of cheerfulness, put on to raise the spirits of her nurse; and succeeded to a certain extent in its object, although Ann told her not to go on like that—it wasn't proper.

Mattie lay and thought of the chances for and against her that day; what if that burning fever and increasing restlessness gained the mastery, who would be the worse for her loss, and might not she, with God's help, be the better? She was scarcely a religious woman; but the elements of true religion were within her, and only biding their time. She was honest, pure-minded, anxious to do good for others, bore no one malice, and forgave all trespasses against her—she went to chapel

every Sunday—and she did not feel so far off from heaven on that sick bed. She thought once or twice that she would be glad to die, if she were sure of the future happiness of those for whom she had lived. She would like to know the end of the story, and then—*rest*. She could not die without seeing the old faces, though, and therefore she must make an effort to exist for her own sake.

In the evening, Ann Packet, looking a little scared, said—

"Here's a gentleman come to see you. It's not quite right for him to come up, I'm thinking."

"Who is it?"

"Mr. Hinchford."

"*Old* Mr. Hinchford?"

"No, the young one."

Mattie, even with the scarlatina, could blush more vividly.

"Mr.—Mr. Sidney!" she gasped. "Oh! he mustn't come in here."

"Mustn't he, though!" said the deep voice of Sidney, from the other side of the room. "Oh! he's not at all bashful, Mattie."

Sidney Hinchford came into the room and walked straight to the bed where Mattie was lying —where Mattie was crying just then.

"Why, Mattie!—in tears!"

"Only for a moment, Mr. Sidney. It is very kind of you to come and see me—and you have taken me by surprise, that's all."

"She's to be kept quiet, sir," said Ann.

"I'll not make much noise," he answered.

He stood by the bed-side, looking down at the stricken girl. The change in her, the thin face, the haggard looks, increased as they were by illness, had been a shock to Sidney Hinchford, though he did his best to disguise all evidence from her.

"Go and sit there for the little while you must remain in this room," said Mattie, indicating a chair by the window, at some distance. "You were rash to come into this place."

"I'm not afraid of fever, Mattie, and I was not going to lose a chance of seeing you—the first chance I have had."

"And you don't think that I have been wrong,

Mr. Sidney?" asked Mattie; "you haven't let all that Mr. Wesden has said, turn you against me? I'm so glad!"

"Mattie, there's a little mystery, but I daresay you can clear it—and I swear still by the old friend and adviser of Great Suffolk Street. And as for Mr. Wesden—why, I'm inclined to think that that old gentleman is growing ashamed of himself."

"You say nothing of Harriet?"

"She is the champion of *all* absent friends—the best girl in the world. When I tell her that you——"

"You must not tell her where to find me—you will not act fairly by her, if you thrust her into danger, sir. I rely upon you to keep her away."

"Well, you women do catch things very rapidly," said he; "I—I think that perhaps it will be as well not to let her know of your illness."

"Thank you—thank you."

"But when you are well again, I shall bring her myself to see you. We'll have no more games at hide and seek, Mattie."

"Not yet."

"Why—not yet?" was the quick answer.

"I am no fit companion for her—her father thinks. So it must not be. I have seen her—watched for her several times."

"Ah!—I suppose so. You know that we are engaged, Mattie?" he said; "that was an old wish of yours, Harriet tells me."

"Yes—when are you to be married?"

"Oh! when I can afford to keep a wife. Shall I tell you how I am getting on now?"

"I should like to hear it," said Mattie, "but you mustn't stop here very long. For there *is* danger."

"I don't believe it," said he, laughing; "besides, my father has furnished me with a lump of camphor as big as my head, which I've been sitting on the last five minutes. Now, Mattie, let me tell you where I am, and what I am doing."

In a few words, Sidney sketched the particulars of his present mode of life, spoke of his prospects *in futuro*, and of the kindness which he received at all hands. He was an agreeable companion, and brought some of his vigour and good spirits into that little room with him. He spoke cheerfully and

heartily, and the pleasant ring of his voice sounded like old times to Mattie. She lay and listened, and thought it was all very comfortable—she even forgot her fever for awhile, till she remembered the length of time that he had remained with her.

"I hope you will go now," she said, rather suddenly.

"Am I wearying you?—I beg pardon, Mattie. Some of these days when you are better, I intend a longer stay than this."

"Indeed!"

"I shall try my own powers of persuasion, in order that Harriet and I may fight your battles better for you," he said; "we must clear up that mystery—I hate mystery."

"I know it."

"Upon my honour, I would as soon have a sister maligned as you!" cried Sidney; "we are such old friends, Mattie."

"Yes, yes—go now, please. And keep Harriet away, for her own sake, and yours."

Sidney promised that, and then shook hands with her.

"You must not be very shocked at my stalking in here—fancy it is your brother, Mattie. I shall make Harriet a clean confession when I get back —not to-night, though."

He went from the room, followed by Ann Packet. Outside, the cheerful look upon his face suddenly vanished, and he became so grave that Ann Packet stared aghast at him.

"Who's her doctor?"

Ann told him.

"I'll send some one myself to see if he's treating her correctly."

"Don't you—don't you think that she's so well?"

"I think that she's very ill—worse than she is aware of herself. Take care of her, Ann, she's an old friend!"

He went down-stairs hastily, and Ann returned to the room to find Mattie in a high fever, sitting up in bed with a wild look in her eyes.

"Ann, Ann—he must never come again! I—I can't bear to see him now."

"Patience, my darling. Keep quiet—why not?"

"Oh! I don't know—but he makes my heart ache—and, and, he is coming into danger here. Oh! Sidney! Sidney!"

She flung herself back in her bed, and sobbed and tossed there till the fever grew upon her more and more, and robbed her of her senses. And in the delirium which followed, Ann Packet learned the secret of Mattie's life, and wrung her hands, and cried over it.

CHAPTER II.

IN WHICH SEVERAL DISCOVERIES COME TOGETHER.

When Sidney Hinchford called the next morning at Tenchester Street, to inquire after Mattie's health, Ann Packet met him at the door, and informed him that the invalid was worse, and on no account to be disturbed. In the course of the day a new doctor arrived, commissioned by Sidney; and being a man not inclined to pooh-pooh every system but his own, gave his opinion that Mattie was being treated correctly, and he saw nothing to improve upon. So the doctor was not changed; and being a poor man struggling for a living in a little shop round the corner, I hope he was sufficiently grateful, especially as Ann Packet did not

require a twelvemonth's credit, but settled his bill every Saturday night with the washerwoman's.

And three Saturday nights went by before Mattie was considered out of danger of the fever's return, and in rather more imminent danger of the exhaustion which that fever had occasioned. Sidney Hinchford had taken Tenchester Street and Southwark Bridge in his new route to the City, and called every morning for the latest news—Ann Packet had brought it down to him, with Mattie's kind regards and compliments, and he had not been permitted to see her since that night referred to in our last chapter.

Mattie was getting better when the fourth week was over—learning to be strong, anxious about the expenses that had been incurred, solicitous even about her little dressmaking connection, which would have flown to the four winds of heaven had scarlatina thought of taking its measure.

Mattie had found strength to leave her bed and sit up for a while in the chair by the fireside, when the second visitor astonished Tenchester Street by her arrival. No less a visitor than Harriet Wesden

herself—who, having learned Mattie's address by degrees from the unfaithful Sidney, had made an unlooked-for *raid* upon the premises.

"Don't cry—don't speak—don't say anything for ever so long!" she said, with one gloved finger to her pretty mouth; "if there's anything to get over—get over it without any fuss, my dear."

Mattie was silent for a while—she turned her head away and looked at the red coals. This was a meeting that she thought would come some day; that in her heart she did not blame Sidney Hinchford for promoting, although the danger of it rendered her uneasy.

"Farther away, Harriet," she murmured at last.

"I'm not afraid," said Harriet; "I don't believe that I'm of a feverish sort, or that there's any danger. If there were, I should have come all the same, and stopped just as long, after wheedling the address from Sid."

Ann Packet fidgeted about the room; she was jealous of her charge, fearful of Mattie becoming excited, and of Harriet Wesden talking too much to her. Harriet Wesden saw this.

"You may trust me with her, Ann—I will be very careful."

"I hope you will—I shouldn't like the doctor to say I'd let you chatter her off into a fever again. You'll take care, Mattie."

"Yes, Ann."

At the door she paused again.

"You allus were such a gal to talk when once set a going, Mattie—now doee be as careful as you can! When I come back from marketing, I'll hope it's all done atween you two."

Ann Packet withdrew; the two girls—we may say, despite the difference of position between them, the two friends—looked at each other for a short while longer. Mattie was the first to speak.

"Now you have come, Harriet, you must tell me all that has happened since we parted—every scrap of news that affects you is always welcome to me."

"Shall I sum it up in three words, that will content you, Mattie—I am happy."

"I am so glad—so very glad! Harriet," she

added more eagerly, "you do love him? It isn't a fancy, like—like the others?"

"Mattie, I love him with my whole heart—I never loved before—I feel that the past was all romantic folly. You don't know what a noble fellow he is—how kind and thoughtful!"

"Yes—I do."

"Ah! but you don't know him as I know him; the truth of his inner self, the nobleness of his character, the earnestness of his nature. Mattie, I feel that I have deceived him—that I should have told him all about Mr. Darcy, and trusted in his generosity, in his knowledge of me, to believe it. It was a cruel promise that you wrung from me."

"Harriet, I was thinking of your own good name, and of the story that the world would make from yours. I think I was right."

We wiser people, with principles so much higher, think Mattie was wrong, as she thought herself, in the days that were ahead of her.

"And this Mr. Darcy, Harriet, have you seen or heard from him since?"

"I received one letter. I returned it to its writer unopened."

"That was right. And the Eveleighs, what do they know, do you think?"

"Nothing."

"Then we must be safe."

"We?" echoed Harriet; "when you are bearing the stigma of my indiscretion! Mattie, you went out that night in search of me."

"No matter," responded Mattie; "I must not talk too much. Let me hear you speak of all old friends—it's like the old times back again to have you here."

"And they will come back."

"*Never!*" was the solemn reply.

"Not that tiresome shop, perhaps," said Harriet, "but the times like unto the old, and all the better for the difference. You know what a weak and sanguine woman I was."

"Well—yes."

"I am a strong and sanguine woman now, and there are good times I brood upon, and look forward to still. Shall I sketch you the picture?"

"If you will."

Mattie listened very anxiously; Harriet, with her bonnet in her lap, and her golden hair falling about her shoulders, sat steadfastly looking at our heroine.

"A little cottage somewhere in the country—a long, long way off from this London, which I dislike so much. Sid and I together, and you our faithful friend and housekeeper. Oh! that *will* come true!"

Mattie shook her head.

"I think not."

"Why, you will not desert us!"

"When the time comes round for the cottage, I will give my answer. I think that—I—should—like to come some day—when you have children, perhaps, to take care of *them*. But it is a long, long while to look forward to—almost wicked to build upon, is it not?"

"I don't see where the wickedness lies."

"And as for the country—why in the country, Harriet, when Sidney will have to work in London?"

"He may make his fortune and retire," she said, after a pause.

The secret of Sidney's life was sacred, even from Mattie. Harriet could not dwell upon it without arousing a suspicion.

"I feel that we shall all be together some day—and now, before that day comes, let us speak of something else."

Harriet Wesden hastened to disburthen herself of all the thoughts which she had had concerning Mattie's future mode of living; if it were dress-making, how Harriet could help her to increase the connection—and, whatever it was, how she, Harriet Wesden, must do her best for Mattie.

All this was very pleasant to our heroine, though it troubled her, and almost mastered her at times. Pleasant to witness the evidence of the old love, of no new love having ousted her from a place in Harriet's heart. With the exception of honest Ann Packet, Mattie had earned no affection for herself, and had stood even isolated from it, until Harriet turned to her as her friend, trusted in her, and—did she ever dream it in the days when she ran

barefooted through the London streets?—sought advice from her. And then, from that hour, Mattie studied Harriet, saw her weaknesses, and did her best to counteract them; moulded her—though neither knew it, or would have guessed it—anew, and helped to make the true woman which she was at that hour.

Mattie felt glad that she had been ill, now; her illness had brought Harriet to her side, and proved that she had lived in all her thoughts.

They were still talking together in the gloaming when the doctor called, bowed to Miss Wesden, and then paid attention to his patient.

"It's very dark," said he, after an ineffectual attempt to see Mattie's tongue; "but you're better, I perceive. Keep still, don't trouble yourself about a light, Miss Gray,"—Mattie, for some reason she could have scarcely explained to herself, had assumed the title which Mrs. Watts, in their last meeting, had bestowed upon her—"I have brought a friend to see you to-day, not knowing that you were engaged."

"Who is he?" Mattie inquired.

"A gentleman connected with the chapel—our chapel."

"Indeed!"

"He helps us with the district business when he's in town—and he has been very anxious to see you for the last fortnight, but the young woman who waits upon you said—very rudely, I fear—that she wouldn't have you worried for fifty parsons. May he come in?"

Before Mattie had made up her mind, he came in without permission. It was difficult to distinguish him in the shadowy room, save that he was short and thin, and moved about with extraordinary celerity.

"When the sinner is too weak to go forth in search of the Word, it should be brought to her by all men earnest for sinners' redemption," he said, in a high, hard voice, very unsuitable for an invalid's chamber; "and I trust that Miss Gray will not consider me out of place in coming hither to teach her to be grateful for her recovery."

"She is scarcely recovered yet, sir," Harriet ventured to suggest.

"What does Miss Gray say?" he said, as though Miss Wesden's word was to be doubted.

"That it is very kind of you to come—but that I am a little weak just at present."

"I called on the doctor—he's not of your opinion—he ought to know best."

"Yes, yes," said the doctor, "but you promised only a few words."

"I am a man of my word," was the brisk answer.

"I beg pardon, I never said that you were not," said the doctor; "but we must be gentle with our patient yet awhile—and she has already been receiving visitors to-day."

"If Miss Gray objects, I will go."

Mattie said that she did not object, and, without further ceremony, the stranger began to pray for her, lowering his voice when he found that he need not shout at the top of his lungs to be heard in that little room, and even praying with some degree of eloquence, and a more than common degree of earnestness, which was some little apology—if not quite enough—for his unwarrantable intrusion.

It was a long prayer, and spared no one. The doctor, after waiting five minutes, and finding thanksgivings for recovery, and for shortening his bill, not in his line, took his departure on tiptoe; Mattie listened reverently, with her hands clasped in her lap; Harriet, who had not forgiven the intrusion, thought of Sidney more than the preacher, and threw the latter out in his extempore oration by suddenly poking the fire, and then dropping the poker with a crash into the fire-place. Ann Packet returned from marketing, and found the preacher in the middle of the room on his knees, and disgusted with his tactics, after the many times she had denied him admittance, proceeded to arrange the tea-tray and light the candle, with a noisy demonstrativeness that was perfectly unnecessary.

"Amen" sounded at last, and the little man rose to his feet, over which Ann Packet had twice stumbled, buttoned his black dress-coat across his chest, picked up his hat, and proceeded to retire without further words, like a man of business, who, having done his work, was in a hurry to get home.

Suddenly he paused and regarded Harriet Wesden attentively. The light in the room was feeble, and might deceive him, he thought, for, with a quick hand, he caught up the candlestick and held it nearer to her.

"Miss Wesden—surely?"

Harriet saw nothing to recognize in the wiry-haired, high-cheek-boned preacher. He was a stranger to her.

"Yes, sir."

"It's not a common name, but I presume not connected with the stationer's in Great Suffolk Street?"

"It was once, before my father left the shop."

"The coincidence never struck me before—that's rather odd, for I'm not generally so dull. You don't remember me?"

"I have never met you before."

"Oh! yes—at the Ashford railway station, in the middle of the night—you claimed my protection from a cruel snare that had been laid to entrap you."

"Hush, sir!—yes, sir," said Harriet, with a glance

at Ann Packet, who, however, was still busy with the tea-things; "I remember you now; you were very kind to me, and took pains to relieve me from a great anxiety."

"And what has become of——"

"I have never seen him," Harriet interrupted.

"And he hasn't sought you out, and——"

"No, he hasn't. Please say no more about it!" she cried to the inquisitive man; "I have forgotten the story. Mattie, ask him to be quiet."

"How's that possible? How can a—*Mattie!*" he ejaculated, suddenly struck by that name, dropping his hat and then putting his foot upon it in his excitement; "your name Mattie, and acquainted with a Miss Wesden, who lived once in Suffolk Street! And Miss Gray, too!—my name!—Mattie Gray, why, it must be!"

"Must be—what!" gasped Mattie, rising in her chair.

"Keep quiet—you're to be kept quiet—the doctor said so," he stammered, fighting wildly in the air with both hands; "don't alarm yourself—try and guess who I am for the next hour and a half.

I'll be back by that time—where's my hat?—good evening."

He turned to dart out of the room, and ran against Sidney Hinchford, who had been standing there an amazed listener—*for how long?*

"Break it to her by degrees before I come," he said to Sidney; "I'm her father—I have been looking for her all over the kingdom. Do me this good turn?"

"One moment—I am going your way. Mattie understands it already."

"Sidney!" cried Harriet.

"I shall be back in a few minutes," he said, and then the local preacher and the banker's clerk went out together.

CHAPTER III.

FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

THE three women left behind in that little room remained silent from the shock. They were amazed, perplexed. The sudden excitement of the preacher; the strange questions he had asked Harriet Wesden before the name of Mattie had changed the topic of conversation; the presence of Sidney Hinchford as a witness to all this; his abrupt departure with the preacher—all tended to create doubt, and suggest to one, at least, the presence of danger.

Mattie had not given much thought to Sidney Hinchford's appearance; the preacher's excitement, the return of a far-off thought to her, had rendered all that had followed vague and indistinct—the scene had been even too much for her, and she began to slowly close her eyes.

"I think she has been talked and worried to death too much," cried Ann running to her; "Miss Harriet, I'd go now, if I were you."

"Perhaps I have remained too long," said Harriet, rising.

"No," said Mattie, feebly, "I have been surprised by all that has just happened. You are not the cause."

"I think I would lie on the bed a little while, Mattie," said Harriet.

"Don't go till I feel better."

Mattie lay on the bed as directed; Harriet did not resume her seat, but stood with one arm on the mantel-piece, looking thoughtfully before her, where no fancy pictures lingered now. There was a long silence. Ann Packet placed some smelling salts in Mattie's hand, and then sat at a little distance, watching her. Harriet retained her position until Mattie drew the bed-curtain further back and looked at her.

"I am better now. You will wait till Sidney comes back to fetch you home, Harriet?"

"It is very late. He may not come back."

"He is sure to come," said Mattie; "pray sit down again, and Ann shall make us tea. Harriet, that man is my father."

"Do you really think so?"

"It was all a truth that that horrible woman told me on the day the house was robbed; he has been in search of me; he has found me at last —I shall not be alone in the world ever again!"

"You are glad then, Mattie?"

"Why should I not be?" asked our heroine; "I think that he is a good man—I think that he must have cared for me a little, to have taken so much trouble in his search for me—he will come back soon, and then we shall know all."

"He comes back to your gain and my loss," Harriet was on the point of saying, but checked herself; Mattie was excited enough without the cares of her friend to be added to her own.

It was a silent, thoughtful meal; Ann Packet, absorbed in gloomy reverie, took her tea with stony apathy. She could see that changes were coming towards her also, and the shape that they might assume was hard to guess at. She should lose

Mattie perhaps, and that was sufficient to disturb *her*.

Tea was over, and Mattie had returned to her easy-chair, when a faint rapping was heard at the outer-door. Ann Packet went to the door, and found the preacher there, as she had anticipated.

"Is she prepared—has she guessed?"

"Yes."

"Can I come in?"

"It isn't for the likes of me to say you can't;" and with this evasive reply, Ann Packet opened wide the door and admitted him.

He came in on tiptoe, in a manner strangely at variance with his former brusque entrance; he turned to Harriet Wesden first, and spoke in a low whisper to her.

"Mr. Hinchford bade me say, Miss Wesden, that he was waiting for you, downstairs."

"Thank you—is he——?"

Harriet did not know how to finish her sentence, and left it in its embryo condition. Her face was pale, and her heart was beating violently as she stooped and kissed Mattie.

"Good-bye, dear—I must go now—Sidney is waiting."

"Good-bye—are you not well?" asked Mattie, suddenly.

She was as quick an observer as of yore, and the new expression on Harriet's face suggested the new fear.

"Yes—yes—a little upset by what has happened to-day, that's all. Good-bye." And Harriet Wesden departed hastily.

The preacher put his hat on the floor, silently drew a chair towards Mattie, and then sat down close to her side. Ann Packet, from the distance watched them both—saw in an instant the likeness between them, as they sat thus. Both had sharp black eyes, dark hair, thin noses; the general expression of features was the same, harsher and more prominent in the man; and, therefore, rendering him far from a being whose good looks were apparent.

"Your name is Mattie?—you were at Mr. Wesden's for some years?—he adopted you—he took you from the streets?—previous to his kindness,

you were living, off and on, at a Mrs. Watts' of Kent Street, Southwark, where your mother died?"

"Yes," answered Mattie.

"The woman who died in Kent Street, Southwark, was my wife. She and I started in life together happily enough, till she took to drink—oh! the drink! the drink!—and then home became a misery, and we quarrelled very much, and I took to drink myself. I lost my place through drink, and laid the fault to her—we quarrelled worse than ever, as we became poorer and more wretched; I struck her, fought with her, acted the brute until she ran away from me, taking you with her, then but a year old. I did not seek to find her out—I let her go to ruin, and went my own way to ruin myself, until rescued by a miracle—by a good man, whom God sent in my way to amend my life, and teach me all the truths which I had neglected. He found me work again; he raised me from the brute into the man; he altered me body and soul, and when he died, it struck me that I might follow in his steps, and do good unto others, after his example. I was not an unlearned man in all respects;

I fancied that I might do good by an effort—there is no doing good without one—and I made the attempt. When I was rewarded by my first convert, Mattie, that was my encouragement," he said, rising with the earnestness of his topic, sitting down again, and flinging his arms wildly about; "that was my incentive to go on, to save fresh souls from the danger, to struggle in the by-ways of life, for the light which the evil one would for ever shut from us. And I was rewarded for the effort; I have done good; I have spent the last sixteen years of my life in the good cause!"

"You are a minister."

"A local preacher—wandering from place to place, as my employers dictate—occasionally proceeding on my own route; for ever astir, and letting not the sun go down upon my idleness. And all this, while I have been in search of you—tracking your mother at last to Kent Street, and following on your track, until I am rewarded thus!"

He held forth his hand, and Mattie placed hers within it.

"I think that you are my father," she said; "I

am glad to find some one to care for me at last."

"And you will care for *me*?—for I have been a lonely man in the world for many years, and would make atonement for the evil act which cast you to the streets! But Mattie, look at me!"

Mattie regarded him long and steadfastly. It was a strange, hard-featured face, on which was impressed firmness, or obduracy, and little else; but she felt that he was to be trusted and believed.

"You see a very stubborn man, one who has made few friends in life, and who has met with much tribulation in his journey," said he; "you see a man who will do his duty by you, but will not be a gentle father—a man who will never win a daughter's love, and will not let the daughter take the first place in his heart, lest she should wean him too much from the pursuit of sin, and slacken his zeal in the good cause. A man who is poor—who cannot offer you a home much better than this—a man disagreeable, irritable, and obstinate—is he worth calling father?"

"Yes."

"Thank God you say so; it is very horrible to feel alone in the world."

The disagreeable, irritable, and obstinate man, shook Mattie by both hands, kissed her suddenly on the forehead, drew forth a cotton handkerchief, and wiped his eyes and blew his nose vigorously; finished by producing a shabby leather purse, and taking some silver therefrom, which he placed on the mantel-piece.

"My child!—at my expense all future housekeeping. Young woman," to Ann Packet, "you'll draw from that small amount for the future."

"I'm sure I shan't!"

"Eh!—what?"

"I've taken care of her, and been a mother to her for the last four weeks, and you're not a-coming in here all at once, and stealing every bit of comfort away from me!"

"Who is this?" he asked of Mattie.

"A faithful friend, without whom I might have died."

"Then she must be a friend of mine—young woman, you hear that?"

"Ah! I hear," said the stolid Ann.

"And who knows but that you, Mattie, in the better days in store for you and me, may become a worker in the vineyard also?"

"She's not going to work in any yard yet awhile, if I know it!" said Ann.

Mr. Gray rose and picked up his hat again, without paying heed to this allusion.

"I have work to do at home," he said; "I am a mechanic by trade, and have to labour to get my own living; when you are well enough, you must come to my home and make it a different place. I have much to ask you when you are better—I have been troubled about stories that have been told me of you—I am unhappy until I know the truth. You will keep nothing from me?"

Mattie did not reply; that was a matter for future consideration.

"I never allow anything to be kept from me," he said sharply; "I shall be a hard father, rely upon it. I allow nothing for prevarication, and I spare no sin or weakness, however plausible may be the excuse which the sinner offers. I—how dread-

fully askew everything is on this mantel-piece!" he added suddenly, putting the few ornaments thereon at regular distances from each other; "I shall not be a kind father—I know I shan't! The mountains are not harder to move than I am—you're not frightened at me, Mattie?"

"No."

"Not sorry I have come here to claim you?"

"No—glad," said Mattie; "I think I shall be able to trust you, and to understand you in a little while. And the world will never be entirely desolate again."

"Neither for you nor for me—though I have had my pursuits, and been working hard for my master on earth—my Master in heaven. Amen. He has been very kind to me to reward me thus for the little which I have done of late years!"

He was down on his knees in the old place, and praying again; offering a thanksgiving for his daughter's restoration to him. He was a man who cared not for appearances—who doubtless rendered himself extremely ridiculous and objectionable at times—and yet a man so thoroughly in earnest, that

it was hard to laugh at him. At first sight it was difficult to understand him, although Mattie already felt confidence in him, and saw a brighter life in store for her; he was a man whose character was hard to define at a first interview.

The time was inappropriate; the prayer out of place; he might have waited till he had got home, thought Ann; but after a while the deep voice arrested attention, and Mattie listened and was impressed by the man's fervour and rugged eloquence. It was not a long prayer; he was on his feet again, and looking at his daughter once more.

"I shall come to-morrow—next week perhaps we shall be living together, father and child! Dear me, how odd that sounds now! With you at my side, I feel I can confront my enemies better."

"Your enemies?"

"Such as they are—I'm not afraid of them—I rather like them," he added; "they laugh at me, and mimic my ways—shrug their shoulders, and tell one another what a hypocrite I am. It's the easiest thing in the world to say a man is a hypo-

crite, and the very hardest for that man to prove that he is not. But we'll talk about that, and about everything else when you're better. I—I hope I haven't been *going it* too much—good-bye."

"Good-bye, father."

"Ah! that's very good of you," he said; "but you must not be too credulous. I'll bring my marriage certificate to-morrow, and we'll proceed in a more business-like fashion. Good-bye—good evening, young woman."

"Good evening, sir," said Ann, evidently inclined to be more civil to him. When he had gone, Ann Packet insisted upon putting Mattie to bed at once; she was inclined to keep her place, and talk of the extraordinary incidents of that day.

"Talk of 'em to-morrow," said Ann; "you've *gallied* your brains enough for fifty fathers."

"I feel so much happier, Ann, with some one whom I shall have a right to love."

"Well, you've a right to love who you like, o' course."

"And I shan't love my faithful, gentle nurse the worse for it."

"God bless you!—what a gal you are!"

"Life seems beginning with me for the first time—opening new scenes, new faces, new affections. Yes, Ann, I am happy to-night."

"Then I'm glad he's come—I think he's turned up for the best; although," she muttered to herself, "I shouldn't be very proud of another father like him for myself. He's *such a rum un!*"

Meanwhile Harriet Wesden—what had followed the coming of this "rum un" to her? Was her happiness fading away, as Mattie Gray's advanced? Let us see.

CHAPTER IV.

"ONLY PITY."

A COLD frosty air in the streets that night—a chilling welcome to Harriet Wesden as she emerged from the hot room into Tenchester Street. Sidney was waiting for her, staid, silent, and statuesque; he offered her his arm, which she took, and together they proceeded along the narrow street into the Southwark Bridge Road—thence past the old house in Great Suffolk Street towards the Borough.

Harriet Wesden felt that she would have given worlds, had she possessed them, to have broken the silence, and ventured on some topic which might have tested the truth or the folly of her fears; but all thought seemed to have deserted her.

These sudden vacuums are difficult things to

account for—most of us suffer from them more or less at some period or other of our lives. Who cannot remember the sudden hiatus with the friend —male or female—whom we intended particularly to impress with the force of our eloquence; or the collapse in the grand speech with which we wished to return thanks for the handsome manner in which our health had been drunk at that dinner party, or the vote of confidence placed in us at that extraordinary general meeting?

Harriet Wesden was dumb; there was not one thought at which she could clutch, even the coldness of that night did not suggest itself till it was too late to speak, and the idea began to impress her that it would be more unnatural to say a few commonplace words than to keep silence.

She guessed that Sidney knew her secret, or the greater part of her secret, the instant that she had emerged into the street; and to attempt a commonplace discourse with a great sorrow overshadowing him would, after all, have been a mockery, unworthy of herself and him.

But if he would only speak!—not proceed on-

wards so firmly, steadily saying, never a word to relieve the embarrassment of her position. Sidney Hinchford maintained a rigid silence for almost a similar reason to Harriet's; he was at loss how to begin, and break the spell which had enchained him since his engagement. He was walking in darkness, and there was no light ahead of him. All was vanity and vexation of spirit.

At last the silence was broken. They had left behind them the long rows of lighted shops, and come to private houses, and long dreary front gardens, with interminable rows of iron railings; there were a few late office-clerks—a shadowy woman or two—hastening homewards; the roar of London was growing fainter in the distance.

"Harriet," he began, in a deep voice, wherein all excitement was pent up and constrained, "I have heard a strange story to-night from that man claiming to be Mattie's father—is it true?"

"Yes."

She did not ask what he had heard, or attempt any defence; the sound of his voice, deep and resonant after the long silence, had set her heart

beating, and rendered her answer a matter of difficulty.

"It is a strange story, and I have been hoping it might have been explained away by some means not only unnatural—I can almost believe that it is all a dream, and no cruel waking is to follow it. Harriet, may I ask if your father is aware of this?"

"He is not yet."

"You were travelling alone with a gentleman—I will call him a gentleman for the sake of argument—in the middle of the night by the Dover mail train; at Ashford you leave the carriage abruptly, and demand protection from him—speak of a trap into which he had led you, and seek counsel of that man we met at Mattie's house to-night?"

"But——"

"But do not misunderstand me, Harriet—I can read the story for myself; I can see that you were deceived in this man, and had no consciousness of the snare prepared for you, until the hour was too late. I can believe that your sense of right was outraged, and the *gentleman* merited all the scorn which he received—but who was this man to whom

you could trust yourself at that hour, and by what right were you, under any circumstances, his companion?"

"He was a man I met at Mrs. Eveleigh's—he offered to escort me to the railway station."

"A stranger?"

"No—I had met him at Brighton, before then, when I was a school-girl. He—he paid me attentions there which flattered my girlish vanity; and—and then I met him again at Mrs. Eveleigh's."

"What is his name?"

"Darcy."

"You have not seen him since?"

"No—I hope that he and I will never meet again."

"Harriet, you loved this man!"

"No," was the fearless answer; "I cannot believe that now. I might have fancied so at the time—for oh! I was bewildered by many thoughts, and my heart was troubled, Sid—but I never loved him, on my honour!"

"It is easy to think that now," said Sidney in reply; "the idol has fallen from the pedestal, never

to be replaced again—a ruin, in which no interest remains. But you loved him, or believed you loved him at that time—it is a nice distinction—and there was no thought of me and my hopes."

"Sidney, I wrote—I—"

"Harriet, there is no need for us to say one word in anger about this," he interrupted; "I will ask no further explanation—I do not wish it. I can see now where I have been wrong, and whither my folly was leading me—and there's an end of it," he added.

"An end of—what?"

"Of the one hope that I have had. I see, now, how much better it is for you and me, and what a foolish couple we have been."

There was a long silence; they had walked on some distance before Harriet said, suddenly and sharply—

"What do you mean—what am I to understand?"

"That our engagement is at an end, and that it is better for us both to forget the romantic nonsense which we talked of lately. I will not ask

you to forget me; I will not try for a single moment to forget *you*. I will prefer, if you will allow me, Harriet, to remain your friend—something of the old boy-friend I was to you, before the dream came."

"Unjust—unkind!" she murmured.

"No, you will not think that presently," he answered; "you will judge me more fairly, and see for yourself how it could not have ended otherwise for either of us. You have been more than kind to me—you have offered me the sacrifice of your best wishes, even your brightest prospects, out of pity, and I cannot have it."

"Pity!" she repeated.

Harriet was unnerved at his earnestness, at the deep sorrow which betrayed itself in every word, and which he thought that he disguised so well; but her pride was wounded also at his resignation of her, and she could see that there was no defence to urge which, by the laws of probability, had power to affect him. Between her and him that cruel past, which she had hidden from him; that proof of love or fancy for another, when he was

building on her love for him; that evidence against her, which for ever robbed him of his confidence and trust. No, there was no defence, and the scornful echo of his last words were more like defiance than regret.

"Yes, pity!" he reiterated—"only pity! Harriet," he said, for an instant pressing her hand upon his arm with the old affection, "it was kind and noble of you, but it was not love. It was a sacrifice; I was a poor man; there was a great affliction in store for me, and you felt that you alone could lighten it in the present—and in the future, when it faced me and shut me in with it. You saw that you were my one hope, and you took pity on me. It was a mistake—I see the gigantic error that it was now!"

"You will see the truth—you will judge me fairer yet, Sidney."

"This past engagement between us, Harriet, has been a trouble to me lately," he continued; "my selfishness has scared me before this, and I have felt that I had no right to bind you to me for a term of years, ending in calamity at the last. I

was wrong—I retract—I am very sorry for the error—I am glad of this excuse to rectify it."

"You say that!" cried Harriet; "you are glad to break with me—to believe that I did not love you, Sidney?"

"Yes, I am glad. I can see that it was all for the best; and though I could have wished that there had been a different reason for the parting, still it takes a weight from my conscience—it is a relief!"

It was a struggle to say so, but he said it without bitterness, and in good faith. By some ingenious method of word-twisting, which Harriet could not follow, he had stopped all effort to explain more fully, and turned the blame of the engagement on himself. There was no answering; she saw that his heart was wrung with the agony of the dissolution, but she read upon that pale, stern face, to which she glanced but once, an inflexible resolve, that nothing could alter. He upbraided her not; he uttered not one sarcasm upon the folly of her past passion for Mr. Darcy, or the mistakes to which it had led; he ex-

pressed a wish to be her friend still, but he gave her up, and with all her love for him—and she knew how truly it was love then—she could not ask him to reconsider his verdict and spare her a parting as bitter for her as him. She read in that hasty glance at his face, *incredulity* of her affection for him; and no protestation on her part could have altered that. Yes, it was ended between them—perhaps for the best, God knew; she could not think of it then—she was ashamed, miserable, utterly cast down!

"Let me get home," she murmured; "what a long way it is to home."

"I will say no more, Harriet—I have been unkind to say so much," he said, in answer to that cry, in which he might have read the truth, had not his heart been for ever closed to it from that night.

So, in the same silent way as they had begun that inauspicious walk, the two concluded it, reaching the little house of Mr. Wesden shortly afterwards. Colder and more grim the night there; beyond the lighted London streets, in melancholy suburban

districts like to this, there seemed to lurk a greater desolation.

"Good night," he said; "don't think that we part in anger, or that I am hurt in any way at what has happened—or that I am less your friend than ever, Harriet."

"Good night," was all her answer.

He lingered still, as though he had more to say, or was endeavouring to think of something more to render the disruption less abrupt and harsh; but he relinquished the attempt, and left her, walking away rapidly as though at the last—the very last—he feared to trust himself.

He did not go straight home, but walked for awhile up and down the street wherein his home was, at the same rapid pace, with his breath held somewhat, and his hands clenched.

He had acted for the best—it *was* for the best, he thought!—but the result was not satisfactory, and the future beyond was the grey density at which he had recoiled, when crossing the Channel on the day he came to man's estate.

If he had died on that day, or the ship had gone

down with him, how much better he thought then; better for her, for him—even for his father, perhaps, he could not tell at that time!

He went indoors at last, feigned for awhile the old demeanour, and failed at a task beyond his strength for once. He gave it up, and, looking vacantly at his amazed father, said,

"I'm not well to-night. I think I'll go to my room."

"Not well!—you not well, Sid?" exclaimed the father, as though the assertion were the most improbable to make in the world.

"Not very well—a head-ache."

"Ah! too much book-work. Be careful, Sid, don't overtask yourself."

"I shall be well enough to-morrow. Good night."

He left the room abruptly, and turned the key in his own apartment a few minutes afterwards. In his own room, he hunted for a few letters which she had written to him during their brief engagement, and proceeded to burn them in the empty fire-grate.

"So much the best," he muttered, "so much the best!" as though they were charmed words, that kept him strong.

He missed something else, and was uneasy about it. He went to the looking-glass drawer, and turned out the whole contents upon the toilet-table —staring at a letter soiled, crumpled and torn, but still *sealed*, which rewarded his search, and lay at the bottom.

"What's this?" he muttered.

He drew a chair nearer the drawers on which the light was placed, examined the post-mark, the superscription, the seal, then opened the letter, dated on the day he went away on special service.

A long, confused epistle, written with difficulty and under much agitation, but telling one truth, at which he had guessed—which he had spoken of that night.

"I knew it before!" he cried; but the news daunted him, and unmanned him notwithstanding.

It was the climax, and he gave way utterly.

CHAPTER V.

AN UNAVAILING EFFORT.

THE dry, matter-of-fact world, with its face to business and its back to romance, is still interested in love-matters, and passingly agitated by the sudden disruption of any love-engagement. It shows an interest in the latest news, and turns from its account-books for awhile to know how it came about that Damon and Phyllis could not agree upon "proprieties," and thought that it was better to part, for good and aye, than to settle down for good as man and wife. Having learned the news, remarked upon the pity that it was, or the best thing that could happen for *her* or for *him*, the world goes upon its course again, and the story is as old as the hills before the leading characters have got over their first heart-pangs.

It was not a large world that was interested in the disruption of Sidney Hinchford's love engagement; two old men at Camberwell, and a needlewoman, might almost constitute it in this instance. We say almost, for a reason that will appear presently; a cautious writer should always speak with a reserve.

The two old men were interested in the news, but not profoundly affected; such is the selfishness of humanity, when matters do not seriously affect its own comfort.

Harriet Wesden told the news on the following day to her father, and he, after a stare over her head in the old fashion, thought, perhaps, that it was all for the best. Harriet told him the whole story of the past that had led to the parting, and he took stock of the principal features, and thought it was an odd affair, and that he might have been told of this Mr. Darcy a little earlier. After awhile he fancied that it was more comfortable to know that Harriet was to be always with him, to attend to his small ailments, and study his eccentricities. Of late he had harassed himself some-

what with the idea that there would be an early marriage, and that he should be left entirely alone in the world;—with that house and new furniture, that wash-house where the chimney always smoked, and that back-garden where groundsel grew vigorously in the garden paths. The news of the quarrel came with something like a relief to him. Harriet always at home; no one calling to distract attention away from him—well, it *was* for the best, though in his unselfish moments, and he had many of them, Harriet alone in the world after he was gone, was a picture that affected him.

There was something else to trouble him now; Harriet's story had cleared up the mystery of Mattie's actions, that last mystery which had led to an act of injustice on his part. That he had been unjust, and cast Mattie back to the streets, troubled him far more than the broken love-pledge between Harriet and Sidney; for the first time in his life he had done a wrong, a palpable and cruel one, which might have submerged a soul, and he was sorry, very sorry, for all that had led to it. It did not matter that Mattie had been rescued from

utter loneliness by the appearance of her father upon the scene; his hasty judgment had only brought about the wrong, and he had tried to walk uprightly all his life, and do his best according to his powers.

Harriet, his daughter, kept her troubles to herself; she had met with the first shock that falls to the share of many a young life, and she had not made up her mind as to the best method of bearing up against it. Two years ago this would not have been a great trouble to her; but two years had wondrously sobered her, and her eyes had only been opened to the true estimate of Sidney's character at the time when he spoke of the necessity of ending all engagement between them. He had not blamed her, or she might have defended herself; he had spoken of his own consciousness of having done wrong to bind her by a promise made in an impulsive moment, he had intimated that it was a relief to him to give her up, and in the face of the cold, unpitying world, she was powerless to act. Still she was hopeful amidst it all; it was no serious quarrel; he had spoken of his wish to re-

main her friend, and by one of the many chances of life, it would not be difficult for him to discover that it *was* love which drew her to him, and not the pity which is akin to it. It might all be explained when the right moment came round; but as the days passed, and no Sidney appeared, her heart sank more, and she read the future in store for her through a medium less highly coloured by her fancy.

A week after the explanation between Sidney and her, she went in search of Mattie. Always in trouble thinking of Mattie—seeking from her that consolation which her own thoughts denied her. Mattie was still in Tenchester Street, although Ann Packet had gone back to the Hinchford service. Mattie was strong enough to shift for herself again—to set about packing her scanty wardrobe for removal to her father's home; she was alone and busy with her preparations for departure, when Harriet Wesden came into the room.

After the first salutations had been exchanged—and flying remarks upon Mattie's better health and brighter looks had been made—our heroine looked

steadily at Harriet, and asked what was the matter.

"Am I so altered that you should think anything had happened, Mattie?"

"There is not the look I like to see *there*," said Mattie, pointing to Harriet Wesden's face.

"It's not a happy look, is it?" she asked, with a little sigh.

"Not very."

"Sit down here beside me, and let me tell you why the happy looks have gone for ever."

"For ever! Oh! I'll not believe that."

"You'll never guess what I am going to tell you?"

"Sidney and you have quarrelled."

"Yes—no—not exactly quarrelled—what a girl you are to guess things! Sidney and I, by mutual consent, have cancelled our engagement."

"I am sorry," said Mattie, after a moment's silence; "sorry, not that the engagement has been broken for awhile, for it will be renewed again—"

"Never!—never!"

"But that any difference should have arisen between you two. As for not making it up

again," said Mattie, cheerfully, "oh! we can't believe that, we two who understand Sidney Hinchford so well."

"There will never be an engagement between him and me again," said Harriet; "over for once and all, Mattie."

"I say there will be," said Mattie, in an equally decisive manner. "Have I lived so long to see it all ended thus? I say it shall be!" cried Mattie, in an excited manner, that surprised even Harriet, who knew Mattie's character so well; "and we shall see, in good time, which is the true prophetess."

"Mattie, you don't know Sidney, after all."

"Tell me the story—I am very anxious."

And with a woman's keen interest in love matters—her own, or anybody else's, as the case might be—Mattie clasped her hands together, and bent forward, all eagerness for Harriet's narrative.

"It's all through your father—that father of yours, who comes upon the scene, and brings misery with him at once!" said Harriet, a little petulantly.

"Hush, Harriet!—remember that he *is* my father, now!" said Mattie, who had found one more to defend in life, and to live for, "and I am learning to love him, and to understand him better every day."

"Yes—yes—you will forgive me—I am always offending some one with my hasty words. This is how the quarrel came about."

Harriet launched into her story at once; in a torrent of hurried explanations the details were poured forth, and Mattie, in a short while, knew as much as Harriet Wesden, which was not all however, as we, who are behind the scenes of this little drama, are aware.

"Perhaps it serves *us* right," said Mattie, pluralizing the case after her old fashion; "we kept something back, and Sidney is straightforward in everything, and hates deceit, even innocent deceit like ours, practised for your good name's sake. Did you tell him that?"

"I don't know what I told him," answered Harriet, sadly. "I said nothing—I was found guilty, and there was no answer left me."

"We shall live this down, I think," said Mattie, confidently. "After all, there's nothing very serious about it—if he don't suspect us of behaving wrongly on that night."

"Sidney suspect that of me! Oh! no, no—not so bad as that!"

"Then it will all come right in time," cried Mattie. "He has loved us all his life, and will not fling himself from us in his pride and anger, as—as other men would do, more selfish and unjust than he. I see the future brightening—we will wait patiently, and not be cast down by this slight trouble."

"Slight trouble!" exclaimed Harriet. "Oh! Mattie, if you only understood what love was like, you would guess my—my sense of desolation."

Harriet flung herself on the bosom of the old faithful friend, whose face, over her shoulder, became suddenly, and for an instant only, very white and lined.

"I will try and guess," she said, in a low voice. "It must be desolate; I—I may know better some day!"

Then Mattie set herself the task of comforting this child—a child still, she thought, in her impulsiveness, and in that weakness which gave way like a child at the first trouble, and sought help and comfort from others, rather than from her own heart. And Mattie, who had the gift—that rare rich gift above all price—of comforting those who are afflicted, succeeded in putting the facts of the case in their best and less distorted light, and was rewarded before the interview was over—and when Harriet remembered it—by the new fact of how one revelation had brought about another, and cleared up the mystery of Mattie's absence from home to the man who had suspected her.

"I broke the promise—there was nothing to keep back, when I had my own story to relate."

"He knows all this," said Mattie, "and he——"

"He is very sorry for all that harshness which drove you from us—I am sure of it."

"Why, it is brightening all round," said Mattie; "we shall have no secret in the midst of us, and all will be well now!"

Both had forgotten the letter, wherein absence

of all true affection was asserted ; Harriet believed it destroyed, and Mattie did not think to remind her of the danger—in her heart believed it even far removed from her.

They parted hopefully ; Mattie made the best of the position, and was really trustful in a good result. Sidney Hinchford loved Harriet, and she could not understand a man loving on, and yet holding aloof from the idol he would fain worship still.

Sidney Hinchford, a few days afterwards, came to make his last inquiries concerning Mattie's health—had he waited another day he would have found empty rooms and a desolate hearth—and Mattie seized that opportunity to say a word. The grass never grew under the feet of Mattie Gray, and the dark look—new to his face in its intensity of sternness—did not deter her.

" I am sorry to hear the last news, Mr. Hinchford."

" It was to be expected," he replied shortly. He would have hastened away from a subject that distressed him, but Mattie was not deterred by his harsh voice.

"Not to be expected, you mean, Mr. Sidney," she said; "for she and you, who have been together all your lives, should——"

"Pardon me, Mattie," he interrupted, decisively; "I cannot bear a third person's interference in this matter. It lies between her and me, and both she and I have thought it better to part, without reproach or ill-will. She has made up her mind——"

"But——"

"And had she not," he said, catching at Mattie's wrist and holding it firmly with his hand, as though to stay her defence by that means, "I have made up mine, and there is nothing on earth, or in heaven, to alter it, I swear!"

"Oh! sir," cried Mattie, dismayed at this assertion, "you will think of this again—of her you have known from a little child, and should be able to trust. There's not a truer, kinder heart, in all the world!"

"She is true and kind—she would even have sacrificed her happiness for my sake—but she never loved me. I have her written evidence to that."

"The letter!—oh! the letter!"

"You knew it?—*you* helped to deceive me, too?"

"Not deceit—all was done for your own good, Mr. Sidney—she did not know her own mind when that letter was written; she——"

"She will never know it—she is a weak woman—God help her! She was never fit for me!"

"Yes," was the quick denial.

"No, I say. A thousand times no!"

He stamped his foot upon the floor, and then turned away, sterner and darker in his looks than ever. Mattie's heart sank then—for she read in his face a resolve that love could not soften, or time ameliorate. She lost hope herself from that day.

"I must make up for him as well as I can," said Mattie, after he had gone; "she must not break down, because he turns away. She is young and will get over it—let me see, now, how shall I teach my darling to forget all this?"

CHAPTER VI.

MR. GRAY FURTHER DEVELOPED.

THAT is a grand trait of character in man, woman, or child—unselfishness. It is a trait that scarcely exists, perhaps, in its pure state; for we are selfish mortals, struggling to cut one another's throats all our lives, and coveting our neighbour's goods with a rare intensity. It is a selfish globe on which we are spinning, and it is natural to think deeply—think altogether, perhaps—of *our* loves, *our* successes, *our* chances of fame, fortune, happiness, rather than of other people's. For the reason that it has been our lot to drop upon an exception to this rule—as near an exception as this rule *sans* exception will allow—do we hold Mattie a first place in our affections, and think her story—approaching its turbulent stage—worth the telling.

Springing from a low estate, and saved as by a miracle—this flower put forth strange buds and blossoms after its transplanting. It outlived the past, and turned quickly to the light, as though light had been its craving from the first, and only a better chance, and a purer moral atmosphere, were needed to wholly change it. Mattie passed from evil to good swiftly, grateful to the hands that had been outstretched to save her; the untaught childhood became swiftly the days of grateful girlhood—and from girlhood to the gentle, honest womanhood, that thought of others' happiness, and strove hard for happiness in those she loved, was but another step, easily made and never repented of.

She did all for the best, and strove hard to make the best of everything—*for others.* We know no better heroine than this, and I am very doubtful if we care for one better educated or of higher origin. And yet, heaven be thanked, not a model heroine, who was always in the right!

Mattie removed to her father's apartments in Union Road, Brunswick Street, New Kent Road.

Brunswick Street is an artery that lets the wild blood of Great Dover Street into the New Kent Road—a quiet street by day, but subject to scared strangers at night in search of the medical students who locate here in legions. Union Road is on the right of Brunswick Street, and a near cut, if you are fortunate enough not to lose yourself, to Horsemonger Lane Gaol, though what you may want *there* is more your business than ours. Mr. Gray rented the two top rooms of a small house in Union Road, the sitting room provided with a sofa bedstead, which was henceforth to be of service to Mattie, when the day's duties were over, and Mr. Gray had finished his praying.

Here settled down the new-found father and child, and began "home" once more. Here Mattie learned by degrees to understand her father, to appreciate the many good qualities which he possessed, and to "make allowance"—as she always made allowance—for the few bad ones, which he possessed also, minister of the gospel as he termed himself.

They agreed very well together; there was little

to disturb the even tenor of their way; and it fortunately happened that Mr. Gray, who was fond of argument, was blessed with a daughter who always shunned it, when the topics did not directly affect her. Mr. Gray, on the whole, was a little disappointed in his daughter—agreeably disappointed, we might have said, had not the discomfiture been so apparent on his features for a while. He was a man fond of making converts; it had been his profession, and he had met with success therein. He had promised himself the pleasure of saving his daughter from the dangers and temptations of the world, and he had found one who was out of danger and as above temptation as he was. From Mrs. Watts' account, subsequently from Mr. Wesden's, he had been led to expect a very different daughter to this; a girl who had run the streets for eleven years—who had been a friendless stray upon those streets, a thief and beggar at intervals when honesty did not *pay*—who had afterwards left her master's house under suspicion of a grave character—was likely to be a wilful, vicious specimen of womanhood, and worthy of his earnest efforts

to subdue. Though he would not have owned it to himself, yet the belief in Mattie being unregenerate and defiant had added an intensity to his search for her; since his own better life, he had been ever in search of a thoroughly fine specimen of impenitence to practise upon, and now even his own daughter had disappointed him!

He discovered that she was a regular attendant at chapel—not even at church, to whose forms he had the true dissenter's objection—that she read her Bible regularly, and took comfort from its pages—that she was gentle, charitable, kind, unselfish, everything that he would have liked to make her by his intense love and application, and which he had found ready-made to hand.

He returned thanks for all this in his usual manner, but there was an occasional blankness of expression on his countenance; he was truly glad to have discovered his daughter, but he found that she was never to owe him an immense debt of gratitude for her reformation, and he had built upon that whenever they were thrown together, father and child, at last. Beyond his home he

must look once more for the obdurate specimen that he could attack, follow up, analyze and dissect, with the gusto of a surgeon over "as fine a case as ever he saw in his life!"

But that home—in a very little time what a different place it was to him! He found in Mattie all that he could have made of her, and after awhile he was more than content. He was a man who made but little show of earthly affection, and possibly deceived Mattie, who took his love for duty more often than he wished, though it was his pride to abjure all evidence of earthly affection, and to consider himself, as he termed it, above it. He was a man who deceived himself by this—people have that peculiar trait of character now and then, and place credence in their own impossibilities.

Mr. Gray was a lithographer by trade—a man who would have earned more money had not his preaching interfered with his work, and had he not been rather too particular for a business man upon what work he engaged himself. A crotchety, irritable being, who brought his religion into his business, and, therefore, occasionally muddled both.

On one occasion he had been horrified by the receipt of an order to lithograph several scenes from the last new pantomime, to be exhibited on broadsheets outside the theatre-doors, and in tobacconists' shops; and having declined to be an agent in such a "Worke of the Beast," had been dismissed from the staff of a firm which he had faithfully served for many years. He had lived hard after that, known what it was to be penniless and fireless, and almost bootless, but those unpleasant sensations had their comforts for him—they were evidences of his sacrifice for his character's sake, and he had fought on doggedly till other employment came, which brought his head above water. He was a man who never gave way in his opinions, or sacrificed them for his personal convenience—a disagreeable man more often than not, but a man respected amongst his chapel-circle, and who, when once understood —that was not often, however—was generally liked. A man who dealt in hard truths, and had not invariably the gentlest method of distributing them; but a man who loved to see justice done to all oppressed, and did his best after his own way.

His first attempt to do justice, after Mattie's acquaintance with him, was in Mattie's favour. He understood all the reasons for Mattie's departure from Great Suffolk Street, and he saw where Mr. Wesden had been deceived, and in what manner he had been led by degrees to form a false estimate of Mattie's conduct.

He was a fidgety man, we have implied—more than that, he was an excitable and restless man.

"I must see that Mr. Wesden again—we must both see him, Mattie," he said one evening.

"Oh! I can never face him," said Mattie, in an alarmed manner, "after all that he has thought of me. I could not bear to ask him to confess that he was in the wrong, if he will not confess it of his own free will."

"But he shall, my dear!"

"I can't explain the robberies—can't prove that I was innocent of all implication in them. I was a thief once, and he will never forget that."

"Won't he?" said Mr. Gray, decisively; "we'll see about that. I'll rouse him, my dear, depend

upon it. The first opportunity I have, I'll call upon that man, and—rouse him."

"I hope not."

Mattie was at work at the fireside; she had taken to dress-making again, amongst a new connection of chapel-goers introduced by her father, and Mr. Gray was busy at his lithography. He was working hard into the night, doing extra work, in order that he might have all the next week free for a preaching expedition amongst the colliers, and he did not turn from his work to express his opinion; on the contrary, bent more earnestly over it.

"It's no good hoping, my dear, I have made up my mind; he hasn't acted fairly by you—he hasn't made atonement—I must talk to him presently."

Mattie was glad of the postponement, and hopeful that her father, in his multiplicity of engagements, would forget his determination—a strange hope, for Mr. Gray never forgot anything.

"What kind of man is this Mr. Wesden, Mattie?" he asked; "I have only seen him once, for a few minutes. Hard, isn't he?"

"Sometimes. He has altered very much lately."

"A worldly man—fond of money—grasping, in fact. Such a man is hard to impress. I'll have a try at him, though."

"He's a very good man, father," Mattie said; "you must remember that he saved me from the streets, and that for years and years was very good and kind to me."

"Yes, yes—I shall pay him back some day—but he must be worldly, I should think, and in return for all his goodness I'll make a good man of him—see if I don't! I suppose you used to open on Sundays in Great Suffolk Street?"

"Never."

"Hum—that's well. Not so bad as I thought. Did he go to chapel of a Sunday, now?"

"To church—St. George's."

"Hum—that's not so bad. Not much credit in making a better man of *him*," he muttered; "but I'll—rouse him!"

The next day he neglected his work on purpose to attempt the experiment. He was successful

enough, for there was a rough eloquence inherent in him, and he had a fair cause to plead; and the result was, that the roused Mr. Wesden made his appearance arm in arm with Mr. Gray at Mattie's home.

"I've got him!" said Mr. Gray, triumphantly; "here's Mr. Wesden, Mattie. He has come to say how very sorry he was for all that parted you and him—haven't you, sir?"

"Very sorry," said Mr. Wesden, looking at Mattie askance; "I've been thinking of it a long while—yes, Mattie, very sorry!"

He held out both hands to her, and Mattie ran to him, clasped them in her own, shook them heartily, and then burst out crying on his shoulder.

"Oh! my first father!—I didn't think that you would believe wrong of me all your life!"

"No—and it was very wrong—Mattie. And all will be right now—you and your father must come and see us very often."

"Yes."

She turned to her father eagerly, but Mr. Gray was at his lithography, bending closely over his

work, and apparently taking no heed of this reconciliation. He had done his share of duty, and so his interest had vanished.

"Father—you hear?"

"I don't care about much company—when we've nothing better to do than idle our time away, perhaps," was the far from suave reply to this.

"My daughter and yours are old friends, Mr. Gray," said Mr. Wesden, almost entreatingly.

"Mattie won't care about much company herself—and I very much doubt if—if that young person you allude to—is exactly fitting for my daughter, whose character I am anxious to model after my own ideas of what is truly womanly."

Mattie looked up at this; her father was strange in his manner that night, and he perplexed her.

"Am I not truly womanly now, sir?" she asked, with a merry little laugh. She was in high spirits that night.

Mr. Gray softened.

"You are a very good girl, Mattie—a very good girl indeed; there are only a few little alterations necessary," he added, as though he was speaking

of some marble statue whose corners he might round off with a chisel at his leisure.

"And you, sir," said Mattie, turning to Mr. Wesden again, "don't think *any* harm of me now? The robberies—the talk with Mr. Hinchford—" she added, with a faint blush.

"What was that?" asked Mr. Gray, with renewed alacrity.

"Foolishness—all foolishness on my part," said Wesden; "how could I have acted so? And yet, when it came to being out all night, the fancies turned to truths, it seemed. Ah! no matter now."

"No matter now. Oh! I am very happy. Will you sit down here for awhile, and tell me about Harriet and yourself—and *she* who was always so kind to me?"

"And thought well of you to the last. We wrangled once or twice about that—the only thing we ever had to quarrel about, Mattie, in all our lives together."

"Sit down and tell me about her—my true mother! You will excuse my father—he is very busy."

"Certainly."

And after his old dreamy stare at Mr. Gray, who appeared to have suddenly and entirely lost all interest in Mr. Wesden, he sat down by the fireside and talked of old times—the dear old times that Mattie loved to hear about. Mattie was happy that night; her heart was lighter; her character had been redeemed to him who had mistrusted her; he was sitting again by her side—all her love for him had come back as it were, and all his cruel thoughts of her had vanished away for ever.

Mr. Wesden talked more than he used, when one particular subject was dilated on; and to have Mattie full of interest in that better half of him that had gone from life on earth to life eternal, gave brightness to his eyes, vigour to his narrative, and rendered him oblivious to time, till a deep voice behind him broke in upon the dialogue.

"It's getting late."

"Ah! it must be," said Mr. Wesden, rising. "And you'll come now, Mattie? You have forgiven me?"

"With all my heart—what there was to forgive!"

"And you'll let her come, Mr. Gray, now I have done her that justice?"

"When there's time."

Mr. Wesden departed; Mattie saw him down-stairs to the passage door, and stood watching his figure, not so active as of yore, proceeding down the dimly lighted street. When she returned to the sitting-room, she found that her father had left his work, and was sitting with his feet on the fender, rubbing the palms of his hands slowly together. He did not look round when she came in; when she had taken her seat near him, he did not look up at her. There was a change in him, which Mattie remarked, and after a little while inquired the reason for.

"Mattie," he said, suddenly, "I didn't know that you were so fond of Mr. Wesden, or I'd have never brought him here."

"Yes, I am fond of him—I am fond of all those who have been kind to me—who belong unto the past, of which he and I have been speaking to-night."

"You like him better than me?"

Mattie was too astonished to reply at once to this. She saw the reason for his sudden reserve to

Mr. Wesden in a new light; she detected a new feature in him, that had heretofore been hidden. Years ago—like a far-away murmur—she could fancy that her mother spoke again of her husband's jealousy as one reason why home had been unhappy, and she had fled from it. Mr. Gray became excited. His eyes lit up, his face flushed a little, and his hands puckered up bits of cloth at his knees in a nervous, irritable way.

"I shouldn't like that man to be put ever before me in everything—to be liked better than myself—he has got a daughter of his own to love, and must not rob me of you. I can't have it—I won't have it! My life has been a very desolate one till now, and it is your duty to make amends for it, and be faithful to me in the latter days."

"You may trust me, father."

She laid her hand on his, and he turned and looked into her dark eyes, where truth and honesty were shining. He brightened up at once.

"I think I may—you'll not forget me—you'll be like a daughter to me. Yes, I *can* trust you, Mattie!"

This fugitive cloud was wafted away on the instant; Mattie almost forgot the occurrence, and all was well again.

CHAPTER VII.

A DINNER PARTY.

MEANWHILE Sidney Hinchford had mapped his course out for the future; he had been ever fond of planning out his paths in life, as though no greater planner than he were near to thwart him. That they were turned from their course or broken short, at times, taught no lesson; he gave up his progress upon them, but he sketched at once the new course for his adoption, and began afresh his journey.

He had parted with Harriet Wesden for ever; so be it—it belonged to the irreparable, and he must look it sternly in the face and live it down as best he might. It had been all a fallacy, and he the slave of a delusion—if, in the waking, he had suffered much, was in his heart still suffering, let

him keep an unmoved front before the world, that should never guess at the keenness and bitterness of this disappointment. He had his duties to pursue; he had his father to deceive by his demeanour—he must not let the shadow of his distress darken the little light remaining for that old man, whom he loved so well, and who looked upon him as the only one left to love, or was worth living for.

He told his father that the engagement was at an end; that Harriet and he had both, by mutual consent, released each other from the contract, and considered it better to be friends—simply friends, who could esteem each other, and wish each other well in life. There had been no quarrelling, he was anxious to impress on Mr. Hinchford; he had himself suggested the separation, feeling, in the first place, that Harriet Wesden was scarcely suited to be his wife; and in the second, that he had been selfish and unjust to bind her to an engagement extending over a period of years, with all uncertainty beyond.

The old gentleman scarcely comprehended the

details; he understood the result, and as it did not appear to seriously affect his son, he could imagine that Sid had acted honourably, and for the very best. *He* did not want Sid to marry, and perhaps live apart from him; he knew that much of his own happiness would vanish away at the altar, where Sid would take some one for better, for worse, and he could not regret in his heart anything that retained his boy at his side. In that heart he had often thought that Harriet Wesden was scarcely fit for his son's wife, scarcely deserving of that dear boy—there was time enough for Sid to marry a dozen years hence—he had married late in life himself, and why should not his son follow his example?

Sidney Hinchford heard a little of this reasoning in his turn, but whether he admired his father's remarks or not, did not appear from the unmoved aspect of his countenance. He was always anxious to turn the conversation into other channels; partial in those long evenings to backgammon with his father—a game which absorbed Mr. Hinchford's attention, and rendered him less loquacious. Still

Sidney was a fair companion, and disguised the evidence of his disappointment well; he had set himself the task of making the latter days of that old gentleman free from care if possible, and he played his part well, and would have deceived keener eyes than his father's. That father was becoming weaker in body and mind, Sid could see; he was more feeble than his elder brother now—success in life had tested his nervous system more—possibly worn him out before his time. Like his son, he had had ever a habit of keeping his chief troubles to himself, and preserving a fair front to society. He had had a nervous wife to study, afterwards a son to encourage by his stanch demeanour. He had been an actor throughout the days of his tribulation, and such acting is the wear and tear of body and mind, and produces its natural fruit at a later season.

Sidney Hinchford saw the change in him, and knew that their parting must come, sooner than the father dreamed of. Mr. Hinchford had a knowledge of his own defects, but not of their extent. He was ignorant how weak he had become, as he

seldom stirred from home now ; and his memory, which played him traitor, also helped him to forget its defects! He pictured Sidney and him together for many years yet—the Hinchfords were a long-lived race, and he did not dream of himself being an exception to the rule.

But Sidney noted every change, and became anxious. He noted also that the powers of mind seemed waning faster than the body, and that there were times when his father almost forgot their poor estate, and talked more like the rich man he had been once. He brought a doctor to see him once, sat him down by his father's side, in the light of an office friend, and then waited anxiously for the verdict delivered an hour afterwards, in the passage.

" Keep him from all excitement if you can—let him have his own way as much as possible—and there is not a great deal to fear."

Sidney cautioned Ann Packet, who was partial to a way of her own, and then went to office more contented in mind. Over the office books, he was sterner and graver than he used to be, and more

inclined than ever to repel the advances of his cousin.

His salary had been raised by that time; he had distinguished himself as a good and faithful servant, and he took the wages that were due to him, with thanks for his promotion.

One day, his uncle sent for him into the inner chamber, to speak of matters foreign to the business of a banking house.

"Sidney, I have troubled you more than once with advice concerning my son Maurice."

"Yes."

"He is about to offer you and your father an invitation to dine with him next week."

"I know what to answer, sir," said Sidney, somewhat stiffly. He objected to this advice-gratis principle, and thought that Mr. Geoffry Hinchford might have left him to his own judgment.

"No, you don't, and that's why I sent for you. Maurice will be thirty-one next week—it's a little family affair, almost exclusively confined to members of the family, and I hope that you will both come."

"Sir—I——"

"Bygones are bygones; we do not make a mere pretence of having forgotten the past—*we* Hinchfords," said his uncle. "Sidney, I will ask it as a favour?"

"Very well, sir. But my father is not well, and I fear not able to bear any extra fatigue."

"I am not afraid of old Jemmy's consent," said the banker. "There, go to your desk, and don't waste valuable time in prolixity."

Late that day Maurice Hinchford addressed his cousin. Sidney was going down the bank steps homewards, when his cousin followed him, and passed his arm through his.

"Sidney—you'll find two letters of mine at home. They are for you and your father. I shall call it deuced unkind to say No to their contents!"

"Suppose we say Yes, then!"

"Thank you. The governor and I want you and your governor down at our place next week. No excuses. Even Mr. Geoffry Hinchford will not have them this time; that stern paterfamilias, who thinks familiarity with me will breed the usual contempt."

"For the business—not for you, Maurice!"

"He's very anxious to make a model clerk of you; and very much afraid that I shall spoil you. As if I were so dangerous a friend, relative, or acquaintance! Upon my honour, I can't make it out exactly. I've had an idea that I should be just the friend for you. Perhaps the governor is coming round to my way of thinking, at last."

Sidney repeated his past assertions that their positions did not, and could never correspond. Maurice laughed at this as usual.

"Haven't I told you fifty times that I don't care a fig for position, and that a Hinchford is always a Hinchford—*i.e.*, a gentleman? Sidney, you are an incomprehensibility; when you marry that lady to whose attractions you have confessed yourself susceptible, perhaps I shall make you out more clearly."

Sidney's countenance changed a little—he became grave, and his cousin noticed the difference.

"Anything wrong?" was the quick question here.

Sidney was annoyed that he had betrayed himself

—he who prided himself upon mastering all emotion when the occasion was necessary.

"Oh! no; everything right, Maurice!" he said with a forced lightness of demeanour; "the folly of an engagement that could end in nothing, discovered in good time, and two romantic beings sobered for their good!"

"Why could it end in nothing?—I don't see."

"Oh! it's a long story," replied Sidney, "and you would not feel interested in it. I was selfish to seek to bind her to a long engagement, and we both thought so, after mature deliberation. I turn off here—Good night!"

"Good night!"

Sidney found the invitations awaiting him at home. Mr. Hinchford had opened his own letter, and spent the greater part of the afternoon in perusing and reperusing it.

"What—what do you think of this, Sid?"

"Tell me what *you* think of it."

"Well—I think, just for once, we might as well go—show them that we know how to behave ourselves, poor as we are, Sidney."

"Very well," said Sidney, somewhat wearily; "we'll go!"

"Let me see; what have I done with that dress coat of mine?" said the father; "how long is it since I wore it, I wonder?"

Twenty-five years, or thereabouts, since Mr. Hinchford had worn a dress-coat, consequently a little behind the fashion just then. Sidney Hinchford thought with a sigh of the fresh expenses incurred by the acceptance of his cousin's invitation; he who was saving money for the rainy days ahead of him. How long ahead now, he thought, were the years still to intervene and leave him in God's sunlight? He could not tell; but there was a cruel doubt, which kept him restless. Give him his sight whilst his father lived, at least, and spare the white head further care in this life! Afterwards, when he was alone, he thought, a little misanthropically, it did not matter. His own trouble he could bear, and there would be no one else—no one in all the world!—to grieve about *him*. A few expressions of common-place condolence for his affliction, and then—for ever alone!

Sidney Hinchford and his father went down by railway to Redhill. The dinner-party was for five P.M.—an early hour, to admit of London friends return by the eleven o'clock train. At the station, Mr. Geoffry Hinchford's carriage waited for father and son, and whirled them away to the family mansion, whilst the less favoured, who had arrived by the same train, sought hired conveyances.

"He treats us well—just as we deserve to be treated—just as I would have treated him, Sid. He was always a good sort—old Jef!"

Sidney did not take heed of his father's change of opinion—the world had been full of changes, and here was nothing to astonish him. He was prepared for anything remarkable now, he thought—he could believe in any transformations.

Father and son reached their relative's mansion exactly as the clock in the turret roof of the stable-house was striking five—there were carriages winding their way down the avenue before them, the hired flys with their hungry occupants

were bringing up the rear. Sid looked from the carriage window, and almost repented that he had brought his father to the festivities. But Mr. Hinchford was cool and self-possessed; it was a return to the old life, and he seemed brighter and better for the change.

Maurice Hinchford received them in the hall; the first face in the large ante-room was that of Uncle Geoffry. There was no doubt of the genuineness of their reception—it was an honest and a hearty welcome.

Sidney had mixed but little in society—few young men at his age had seen less of men and manners, yet few men, old or young, could have been more composed and stately. He was not anxious to look his best, or fearful of betraying his want of knowledge; he had graver thoughts at his heart, and being indifferent as to the effect he produced, was cool and unmoved by the crowd of guests into which he had been suddenly thrust. He had accepted that invitation to oblige his cousin, not himself; and there he was, by his father's side, for Maurice's guests to think

the best or worst of him—which they pleased, he cared not.

Poor Sid at this time was inclined to be misanthropical; he looked at all things through a distorting medium, and he had lost his natural lightness of heart. His lip curled at the stateliness and frigidity of his uncle's guests, and he was disposed to see a stand-offishness in some of them which did not exist, and was only the natural ante-dinner iciness that pervades a conglomeration of diners-out, unknown to each other. Still it steeled Sidney somewhat; he was the poor relation, he fancied, and some of these starchy beings scented his poverty by instinct! Maurice introduced him to his mother and sisters—people with whom we shall have little to do, and therefore need not dilate upon. The greeting was a little stiff from the maternal quarter—Sidney remembered on the instant his father's previous verdicts on the brother's wife—cordial and cousinly enough from the sisters, two pretty girls, the junior of Maurice, and three buxom ladies, the senior of their brother—two married, with Maurices of their own.

Sidney endeavoured to act his best; he had not come there to look disagreeable, though he felt so, in the first early moments of meeting; when the signal was given to pass into the dining-room, he offered his arm to his youngest cousin, at Maurice's suggestion, and thawed a little at her frankness, and at the brightness of her happy looking face.

There might have been one little pang at the evidence of wealth and position which that dining-room afforded him—for he was a Hinchford also, and his father had been a rich man in past days—but the feeling was evanescent, if it existed, and after one glance at his father, as cool and collected as himself, he devoted himself to the cousin, whom he had met for the first time in his life.

A grand dinner-party, given in grand style, as befitted a man well to do in the world. No gardeners and stablemen turned into waiters for the nonce, and still unmistakably gardeners and stablemen for all their limp white neckcloths—no hired waiters from remote quarters of the world, and looking more like undertaker's men than lacqueys—no

flustered maid-servants and nurserymaids, pressed into the service, and suffering from nervous trepidation—this array of footmen at the back, the staff always on hand in that palatial residence, which a lucky turn of the wheel had reared for Geoffry Hinchford.

Sidney's cousin sang the praises of her brother all dinner-time; what a good-tempered, good-hearted fellow he was, and how universally liked by all with whom he came in contact. She was anxious to know what Sidney thought of him, and whether he had been impressed by Maurice's demeanour; and Sidney sang in a minor key to the praises of his cousin also, not forgetting in his peculiar pride to regret that difference of position which set Maurice apart from him.

Miss Hinchford did not see that, and was sure that Maurice would scoff at the idea—she was sure, also, that everyone would be glad to see Sidney at their house as often as he liked to call there. Sidney thawed more and more; a naturally good-tempered man, with a pleasant companion at his side, it was not in his power to preserve a

gloomy aspect; he became conversational and agreeable; he had only one care, and that was concerning his father, to whom he glanced now and then, and whom he always found looking the high-bred gentleman, perfectly at his ease —and very different to the old man, whose mental infirmities had kept him anxious lately. Mr. James Hinchford had gone back to a past in which he had been ever at home; his pliant memory had abjured all the long interim of poverty, lodgings in Great Suffolk Street, and a post at a builder's desk; he remembered nothing of them that night, and was the old Hinchford that his brother had known. To the amazement of his son, he rose after dinner to propose the toast of the evening—somewhat out of place, being a relation and yet a stranger almost—and spoke at length, and with a fluency and volubility which Sidney had not remarked before. He assumed his right to propose the toast as the oldest friend of the family, and he did it well and gracefully enough, utterly confounding the family physician, who had been two days compiling a long and elaborate speech

which "that white-headed gentleman opposite" had taken completely out of his mouth.

That white-headed gentleman sat down amidst hearty plaudits, and Maurice's health was drunk with due honours; and then Maurice—"dear old Morry!" as his sister impetuously exclaimed—responded to the toast.

A long speech in his turn, delivered with much energy and rapidity, his flushed and good-looking face turning to right and left of that long array of guests around him. Sidney's heart thrilled to hear one expression of Maurice's—an allusion to the gentleman who had proposed his health, "his dear uncle, whose presence there tended so much to the pleasurable feelings of that night."

"Well—he is a good fellow," said Sidney, heartily; "I wish I had a brother like him to stand by me in life."

His cousin looked her gratitude at him for the outburst, and no one hammered the table more lustily than Sidney at the conclusion of his cousin's speech.

There were a few more toasts before the ladies

retired at the signal given by the hostess; there was a rustle of silk and muslin through the broad doorway, and then the gentlemen left to themselves, and many of them breathing freer in consequence.

There remained some twenty or twenty-five gentlemen to do honour to the wine which shone from the array of decanters on the table; Sidney drew his chair closer to his neighbour's, and looked round him again. His father, perfectly at home—happy and equable—sparing with the wine, too, as Sidney had wished, and yet had not thought filial to hint to his sire. His father almost faced him, and Sidney, whose powerful glasses brought him within range of vision, could return the smile bestowed in his direction now and then. The old man, who had forgotten his poverty, kept in remembrance the son who had shared that poverty with him.

There was more speech-making after the ladies had retired; deeper drinking, and a wider scope of subjects. One gentleman near his father, in a lackadaisical strain, rose to propose

the health of the family physician, who had been balked of his speech early in the evening; and Sidney, startled somewhat by the tone of a voice that he fancied he had heard before, peered through his glasses, and tried to make the speaker out.

He had seen that man before, or heard that strange drawl—where or in what company he was at fault—the man's features were indistinct at that distance. He edged his chair nearer—even in his intense curiosity, for which he was scarcely able to account, changed his place, and went a few seats from the foot of the table, where Maurice was now sitting in his mother's vacated place.

Then Sidney recognized the man—suddenly and swiftly the truth darted upon him—he had met that man in the Borough; he had stood between him and his offensive persecution of Harriet Wesden; he was the "prowler" of old days—the man from whom he had extorted an apology in the public streets, and from whom a generous and unwashed public would accept no apology.

The old antagonism seemed to revive on the

instant; he felt the man's presence there an insult to himself; his blood warmed, and his ears tingled; he wondered what reason had brought that man there, and whose friend he could possibly be?

"What man is that?" he asked almost imperiously of Maurice, who, taken aback by the question, stared at Sidney with amazement.

"A friend of mine," he answered at last; "do you know him?"

"N—no."

Sidney relapsed into silence and mastered his excitement. This was not a time or place to mention how he had met that man, or in what questionable pursuit; there was danger to Maurice, from so evil an acquaintance; and in his own honesty of purpose, Sid could not understand that the man had any right at that table, an honoured guest there. He knew but little of polite society; did not understand that polite society requires no reference as to the morals of its guests, and is quite satisfied if the name be good, and the status unquestionable. Polite society cannot trouble itself about the morals of its male members.

Sidney sat and watched the prowler, and, in his confusion, drank more port wine than was perhaps good for him. He fancied that his cousin Maurice had implied a rebuke for his harsh interrogative; and he was considering *that*, too, in his mind, and wishing, for the first time, that he had not presented himself at his cousin's dinner-table.

The toast was drunk and responded to by the family physician, who very ingeniously dove-tailed the remarks upon Maurice's natal day into his own expression of thanks for the honour accorded him. Sidney omitted to drink the stranger's health, and made no attempt to applaud the fine words by which it had been succeeded. He sat discomfited by the prowler's presence there—but for that man he might never have been engaged to Harriet Wesden, and, therefore, have never experienced the disappointment—the cruel reaction—which had followed the folly of that betrothal.

"Sid," called his father across the table at him, "aren't you well, lad?"

"Oh! very well," was the reply; "what is there to ail me in such pleasant company?"

"Perhaps the gentleman is sighing for lady's society; if he will move an adjournment, I'll second the motion," said the prowler, sauve and bland, totally forgetful of that dark face which had glowered at him once in London streets.

"I shall propose nothing," said Sid, curtly.

Those who heard the uncivil reply, looked towards the speaker somewhat curiously. When the the wine's in, the wit's out—had Sidney Hinchford drowned his courtesy in his uncle's decanters? The prowler—he is a fugitive character, whose name we need not parade at this late stage to our readers—stared at our hero with the rest, but was not affected by it, or understood good breeding sufficiently well to disguise all evidence at his friend's table. He turned to Maurice with a laugh.

"Hinchford, old fellow, I leave the proposition in your hands. You who were always a lady's man."

"Not I."

"But I say you were—I say that you are. Do you think that I have forgotten all the *aventures*

amoureuses of Maurice Darcy—I, his sworn brother-in-arms—his pupil?"

"Steady, Frank, steady!" cried Maurice.

But the guests were noisy, and the subject was a pleasant one to gentlemen over their wine, with the door closed on skirts and flounces. There were shouts of laughter at the prowler's charge—Maurice shook his head, blushed and laughed, but appeared rather to like the accusation than otherwise—Maurice's father, at home and at his ease, laughed with the rest. "A young dog—a young scapegrace!" he chuckled. Even Sidney's father laughed also—young men will be young men, he thought, and the prowler was pleasant company, and made the time fly. It is this after-dinner-talk, when the ladies have retired, and the bottle is not allowed to stand still, which pleases diners-out the most. This is the "fun of the fair," where the Merry-Andrew deals forth his jokes, and the wine-bibber appreciates the double-entendre all the more for the singing in his ears and the thick mist by which he is surrounded.

"Do you think that I have forgotten the sta-

tioner's daughter—by George! that was a leaf from romance, and virtuous indignation in the ascendant. Tell us the story, Maurice, we are all friends here; and though the joke's against you——"

"Gentlemen, I propose that we join the ladies," said Maurice, rising, with some confusion.

The guests laughed again noisily at this—it was so palpable an attempt to retreat, that the dining-room rang again with peals of laughter—Sidney Hinchford, sterner and grimmer than ever, alone sat unmoved, until Maurice had dropped into his seat in despair, and then he rose and looked across at his father.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Certainly—Sid—quite ready!"

"Oh! the ladies have a hundred topics to dwell upon over their coffee, Sidney," said his uncle; "we must have no rebellion this side of the house."

"I am going home, sir—you must excuse me—I cannot stay here any longer. Come, father!"

"Home!"

"I have business at home—I am pressed for time—I will *not* stay!" he almost shouted.

Sidney's father, in mild bewilderment, rose and tottered after him. This was an unpleasant wind-up to a social evening, and Sid's strange demeanour perplexed him. But the boy's will was law, and he succumbed to it; the boy always knew what was best—his son, Sid, was never at fault—never!

The guests were too amazed to comprehend the movement; some of them were inclined to consider it a joke of Sid's—an excuse to retreat to the drawing-room; the mystery was too much for their wine-benumbed faculties just then.

Sidney and his father were in the broad marble-paved hall; the footmen lingering about there noted their presence—one made a skip towards the drawing-room facing them.

"Stop!" said Sid. His memory was good, and his organ of locality better. He walked with a steady step towards a small room at the end of the hall—a withdrawing-room, where the hats and coats had been placed early in the evening. He returned in a few moments with his great-coat on, his father's coat across his arm, and two hats in his hands.

"Then—then we're really going, Sid?"

"I'm sick of this life; it is not fit for us. Why did we come?" he asked, angrily, as he assisted his perplexed father into his great-coat.

"I—I don't know, Sid," stammered the father. "I thought that we were spending quite a pleasant evening. Has anyone said anything?"

"Let us be off!"

Maurice Hinchford came from the dining-room towards them with a quick step. There was excitement, even an evidence of concern upon his handsome face.

"Sidney," he said, holding out his hand towards him, "I understand all this; I can explain all this at a more befitting time. Don't go now—it looks bad. It isn't quite fair to us or yourself."

"You are Maurice Darcy!" said Sid, sternly.

"It was a fool's trick, of which I have heartily repented. It——"

"You were the man who deliberately sought the ruin of an innocent girl to whom I was engaged —you sought my disgrace and hers, and you ask me to your house, and insult me through your

friends thus shamelessly. You make a jest——"

"On my honour, no, sir!"

"No matter—I see to whom I have been indebted; perhaps the motive which led to past preferment—I am ashamed and mortified—I have done with you and yours for ever. I would curse the folly that led me hither to-night, were it not for the light in which it has placed my enemies!"

"You are rash, Sidney. To-morrow you will think better of me."

"When my cooler judgment steps in and shows me what I must sacrifice for my position—*my place*," he replied. "Sir, you are a Hinchford—you should know that we are a proud family by this time. I say that we have done with you—judge me at your worst, as I judge you!—if I fail to keep my word."

He passed his arm through his father's and led the bewildered old man down the steps into the night air; he had been insulted, he thought, and thus, spurning appearances, he had resented it. He could not play longer his part of guest in that house; his old straightforward habits led him at

once to show his resentment and retire. So he shook the dust of the house from his feet, and turned his back upon his patrons.

CHAPTER VIII.

MATTIE'S CONFESSION.

SIDNEY HINCHFORD kept his word. He returned not to service in his uncle's bank. He gave up his chances of distinction in that quarter, rather than be indebted to a villain, as he considered his cousin to be, for his success in life. It was an exaggeration of virtuous indignation, perhaps, but it was like Sidney Hinchford. He considered his cousin as the main cause of his separation from Harriet Wesden; that man had met her after the little Brighton romance, of which faint inklings had been communicated to Sid by Harriet herself, and had played the lover too well—speciously coaxing her from that which was true, unto that which was false and dangerous, and from which her own defence had but saved her. Evidently a deep,

designing man, who had sought the ruin of the woman Sidney had loved best in the world—Sid could not hold service under him now the mask had dropped.

"Father, I shall leave our rich relations to themselves," he had said, the next morning. "I am not afraid of obtaining work in other quarters. I have done with them."

"You know best, Sid," said the father, with a sigh.

"I'll tell you the story—it is no secret now. You shall tell me how you would have acted in my place."

Sid related the particulars of his love-engagement to his father—why it had been broken off, and by whose means, and Mr. Hinchford listened attentively, and exclaimed, when the narrative was ended—

"That nephew was a scamp of the first water, and we are well rid of him."

"I am not afraid of getting other employment," said Sidney, unremindful of his past attempts. "If I were, I think I would prefer starving to service in that bank."

"Both of us would," added Mr. Hinchford.

Sidney thought of his father, and went out again in the old search for a place. It was beginning life again; he was once more at the bottom of the hill, and all the past labour was to be begun afresh. No matter, he did not despair; he was young and strong yet; he had saved money; upwards of a hundred pounds were put by for the rainy day, and he could afford to wait awhile; if fortune went against him at this new outset, his was not a nature to flinch at the first obstacle. He had always fought his way.

But luck went with him, as it seemed to Sidney. That day he heard of the starting of a new bank on the limited liability principle, and he sought out the manager, stated his antecedents, offered his services, and was engaged. He came home rejoicing to his father with the news, and after all had been communicated, his father tendered him a letter that had been awaiting his arrival.

Sidney looked at the letter; in the left corner of the envelope was written "Maurice Hinchford," and Sid's first impulse was to drop it quietly in the

fire, and pay no heed to its contents. But he changed his mind, broke the seal, and read, in a few hasty lines, Maurice's desire for an interview with his cousin. Maurice confessed to being the Darcy of that past evil story, and expressed a wish to enter into a little explanation of his conduct, weak and erring as it was, but not so black as Sidney might imagine. Sidney tore up the letter and penned his reply—unyielding and unforgiving. He could find no valid excuse for his cousin's conduct; he was sure there was not any, and he saw no reason why they two should ever meet again. This, the substance of Sidney Hinchford's reply, which was despatched, and then the curtain fell between these two young men, and Sidney alone in the world, more grim, more business-like, even more misanthropical than ever.

He had soon commenced work in the new bank. Before its start in the world with the usual flourish of trumpets, he had found himself taken into confidence, and his advice on matters monetary and commercial followed on more than one occasion; he was, in his heart, sanguine of success

in this undertaking; he saw the road to his own honourable advancement; his employers had been pleased with the character which they had received from Messrs. Hinchford and Son, bankers, to whom Sidney had referred them, with a little reluctance; before him all might yet be bright enough.

Then came the check to his aspirations—the check which he had feared, which he had seen advancing to rob him of the one tie that had bound him to home. His father gave way more in body if not in mind, and became very feeble in his gait; he had reached the end of his journey, and was tired, dispirited, and broken down. He gave up, and took to his bed. Sidney, returning one day from office, found him in his own room, a poor, weak, trembling old man, set apart for ever from the toil and wear of daily life.

His mind seemed brighter in those latter days, to have cleared for awhile before the darkness set in.

"Sidney," he said, reaching out his thin hand to his son as he entered, "you must not mind my

giving up. I have been trying hard to keep strong, for your sake, but the effort has tired me out, boy."

"Courage! I shall see you hale and hearty yet."

"No, Sid, it's a break up for ever. What a miserable, selfish old fellow I have been all my life! You will get on better in the world without me—only yourself to think of and care for then."

"Only myself!" echoed Sidney, gloomily.

The poor old gentleman would have offered more of this sort of consolation had not Sidney stopped him. It was a cruel philosophy, against which the son's heart protested. Sid was a man to attempt consolation, but not capable of receiving it. His austerity had placed him, as he thought, beyond it, and his father's efforts only stabbed him more keenly to the quick.

Sidney tried to believe that his father's deliberate preparation was a whim occasioned by some passing weakness, but the truth forced its way despite him, sat down before him, haunted his dreams, would not be thought away. The doctor gave no hopes; the physician whom he called in

only confirmed the doctor's verdict; it was a truth from which there was no escape.

When he gave up reasoning against his own convictions, Sidney gave up his clerkship, as suddenly, and with as little warning as he had vacated his stool in his uncle's counting-house.

There was a choice to make between hard work day and night at the new banking scheme—isolated completely from his dying father—and attendance, close and unremitting, to that father who had loved him truly and well, and Sidney did not hesitate.

"Afterwards, I can think of myself," he said; "let me brighten the days that are left you, to the best of my power."

"Ah! but the future?" said the father, anxious concerning his son's position in life.

"I do not care for it, or my position in it now."

"Don't say that, Sid."

"Father, I was working for you, and for your comfort in the future—now let all thoughts of the world go away for awhile, and leave you and me together—thus!"

He laid his hand upon the father's, which clutched his nervously.

"Oh! but what *is* to become of you?"

"Do *you* fear my getting on, with the long years before me wherein I can work?"

"No, you are sure to rise, Sid."

Sidney did not answer.

"Unless you grow despondent at the difficulties in the way, or let some secret trouble weigh you down. Sid, my dear son, there's nothing on your mind?"

"Oh! no—nothing. Don't think that," was the quick response—the white lie, for which Sidney Hinchford deserved forgiveness. He would keep his sorrows to himself, and not distress that death-bed by his own vain complainings against any affliction in store for *him!*

When the father grew weaker, he expressed a wish to see his brother Geoffry again.

"We don't bear each other any malice—Geoffry and I, now. If you don't mind, Sid," he said, wistfully, "I should like to shake hands with him, and bid him good-bye."

"I will write at once, sir."

Sidney despatched his letter, and the rich banker came in his carriage to the humble dwelling-place of his younger brother. Sidney did not see his uncle; he bore him no malice; he was even grateful to him for past kindnesses, but he could not face him in his bitter grief, and listen, perhaps, to explanations which he cared nothing for in that hour. With this new care staring him in the face, the other seemed to fade away, and with it much of his past bitterness of spirit. Leave him to himself, and trouble him no more!

When the interview was over, and his uncle was gone, Sidney returned to his post by his father's bedside.

"He has been talking about you, Sid," said the father; "he seemed anxious to see you."

"I am not fit for company."

"Maurice is abroad, he tells me."

"Indeed!"

Sidney changed the subject, read to his father, talked to him of the old days when the mother and wife were living—a subject on which Mr. Hinch-

ford loved to dilate just then. But in the long, restless nights, when Sidney slept in the arm-chair by the fireplace—he left not his father day or night, and would have no hired watcher—the father, who had feigned sleep for his son's sake, lay and thought of the son's future, and was perplexed about it. His perceptive faculties had become wondrously acute, and he could see that Sidney Hinchford was unhappy—had been unhappy before the illness which had cast its shadow in that little household. There was something wrong; something which he should never know, he felt assured. Who could help him?—who could assist him to discover it?—who would think of Sid in the desolation which was to be that boy's legacy, and do his, or her, best for him?

Early the next morning, when he was very weak, he said:—

"I wonder the Wesdens haven't been to see me."

"I thought they would weary you. They are scarcely friends of ours now. I have not told them that you are ill. If you wish——"

"No, no, and they would weary you, too, my boy, and things *have* altered very much between you. Sidney, you are sorry that they have altered, perhaps?"

"No—glad—very glad!"

"I should like to see Mattie," he said, after a pause; "why does *she* keep away?"

"I thought that she might disturb you, sir," was the reply; "we are better by ourselves, and without our friend's sympathy. We are above it!"

"Why, Sid—that's pride!"

"Call it precaution, sir, or jealousy of anyone taking my place, between you and me, old stanch friends as we are."

His father said no more upon the question; he had been ever influenced by his son, and borne down by his strong will. He thought now that it was better to see no one but Sid, and the good clergyman who called every day—better for all! Sid knew best; he had always known best through life!

But later that day, Sidney altered his mind. He had been sitting in the arm-chair apart from his father, revolving many things in that mind, and

maintaining a silence which his father even began to think was strange—he whose thoughts were few and far between now—when he said suddenly to Ann Packet, who was entering on tiptoe with a candle:—

"Ann, fetch Mattie here at once."

"Mattie, Master Sidney?—to be sure I will," she added, with alacrity; "I've been thinking about that, oh! ever so long!"

"Be quick!—don't stop! Leave a message, if she's away. Here's money, hire a cab there and back. Take the key with you, and let yourself in!"

"What's that for, Sid?" asked the father.

"I think she should be here—I think all should be here who have ever known you, and whom you have expressed a wish to see. I am selfish and cruel!"

"Oh, ho!—we don't believe that, boy!" said the father, "we know better—oh! much better than that!"

"Why shouldn't the Wesdens come?—they are old friends—they were kind to you and me in the old days."

"Yes, very kind. You're quite right, Sid; but if they trouble you in the least, Sid, keep them away. I don't care about seeing anybody very much, now."

"Father, you are worse," said Sidney, leaping to his feet.

"No, boy—better. A spasm or two through here," laying his hand upon his chest, "which will go off presently,"

"That's well."

Sidney sat down again in his old place, muttering, "I wish she would come," and the father lay quiet and thoughtful in his bed once more.

Presently the father went off to sleep, and Sidney sat and listened, with his face turned towards the bed, all the long, long time, until the cab, containing Ann Packet and Mattie, drew up before the house.

They entered the house and came up-stairs together, Mattie and Ann. Sid made no effort to stop them, though his father was in a restless sleep, from which a step would waken him—he still sat there, gloomy and apathetic. They entered the

room, and Mr. Hinchford woke up at the opening of the door.

"Where's Sid?" he called.

"Here," said the son, "and here's Mattie—the old friend, adviser, comforter at last!"

"Oh! why haven't I been told this before?—why have you all kept me so long in the dark?" said Mattie. "Oh! my dear old friend, my first kind friend of all of them!" she cried, turning to the sick bed where Mr. Hinchford was watching her.

"Tell him, Mattie, that I shall not be entirely alone or friendless when the parting comes," said Sidney; "it troubles him—I see it. Ann, don't go—one minute."

He crossed to her, laid his hand upon her arm, and went out whispering to her, leaving Mattie and Mr. Hinchford in the room together.

"Don't let him go away—the boy mustn't leave me now!" he said, in a terrified whisper. "Mattie—I'm worse! I have been keeping it back from the boy till the last, but I'm awfully worse."

Mattie glanced at him, and then ran to the door and called Sidney.

"I am coming back," said he, in reply; "speak to him, Mattie, for awhile. I am wanted here."

Mattie returned to the bed-side.

"He is wanted down-stairs, he says."

"Ah! don't call him up, then, Mattie—some one has heard of his cleverness, and come after him to secure him. Well, it will be a distraction to him—when—I'm gone."

"And you so ill—and I to be kept in the dark!" said Mattie, dropping into the chair at the bed's head, and looking anxiously into the haggard face.

"I have been thinking of you, Mattie," he said, in a low voice; "thinking that you might be—of use—to him in the—future."

Mattie shook her head sadly.

"Why not?" was his eager question.

"He is strong, and young, and knows the world better than I. How could I ever be of use to him?"

"He is weak—low-spirited—not like his old self now—never again, perhaps, like his old—self! Mattie, I—seem—to think so!"

"Courage, dear friend. He will be always strong; his is not a weak nature."

"Mattie, I think he should have married Harriet Wesden, after all," said he; "he loved her very dearly. She loved him, and understood how good, and honourable he was, at last. What separated them? I—I forget."

And he passed his hand over his forehead, in the old vacant way.

"No matter now, perhaps. They are parted—perhaps only for a time. I have hoped so more than once."

"You have? You who guess—at the truth—so well. Why, Mattie, I—have hope, then, too—that it will not be—always dark like this."

"That's not likely."

"And if the chance comes—to bring those two together—you will do it? Oh! Mattie, you promise this—for me?"

"I promise."

"But," with a new fear visible on his face, "you will lose sight of him before the chance—of happiness—comes to the boy. You, ever apart from him—may not know——"

"Yes, I shall know—always!"

"He always stood your friend, remember, Mattie," said the old man, as if endeavouring to win over Mattie heart and soul to the new cause, by all the force of reasoning left in him. "He wasn't like—me, and Wesden—ever inclined to waver in his thoughts of you. He believed—in you ever—to be good and true—and you will think of this?"

"I will," was the faint reply.

Mattie had bowed her head, and it was almost hidden in the bed-clothes. The old man's hand rested for an instant on the girl's raven hair.

"I have—a hope—that from you, and through your means, Sid—poor old Sid!—may find peace and comfort at last. I was thinking—of your liking for us all—this very night."

"Were you? It was kind to think of me," with a low murmur.

"And I—somehow—built my hopes in you. Do you remember how you—and I—used to talk of Sid—in that old room, in Suffolk—Street?"

"Well."

"Keep me in his memory, when he's very sad,

remind him—of me—and how I loved him, Mattie," in a low, excited whisper. "I'm sure that he's in trouble—that he keeps something—back from—me!"'

"A fancy, perhaps. What should he hide from you?"

"I cannot tell; it may be fancy, but it—it worries me to think of. Oh! Mattie, you'll forget him, if that trouble—should come to him! You'll forget—all this—and turn to that new father of yours! And I had hope in you."

"Hope in me ever. I will not betray your trust in me. Before all—myself, father, friends—*your son!*"

"Mattie!"

The father looked with a new surprise at our heroine. He had grown very weak, but her hasty, impetuous voice, seemed for an instant to give new life unto him.

"Hush! don't betray me. Never to living soul before have I dared to tell, to breathe this! God forgive me, if I have failed to break away from all my folly, and have thought of him too much, as I,

a stray from the streets, had never a right to think of one so well-born, honourable, and true. You forgive me—you, his father?"

"Yes."

"You know all now. How, without one ambitious thought of linking his name with mine, I will love him ever, and be ever, if he need it, his true friend, and sister. I will die for him, when the time comes, and the secret will die with me, and not shame us both. Judge me, if I am likely to forget him, sir."

"No—no—I see all now."

"Don't mistake me; don't think at the last that I would scheme for him, or ever marry him, to disgrace a family like yours. Don't think anything but that I love Harriet Wesden, also, before myself, but not before him, though I have tried so hard to live him down! and that I will do my best —always my very best—to bring about the happiness of both of them!"

"And there—may—be only one way, Mattie."

"Only one way, I hope."

"I trust you—God bless you!—you were always

a good girl. Call the boy—my poor boy, Sid!"

Mattie did as requested. At a slow, almost a painfully slow pace, Sidney re-entered, his hand still on Ann Packet's arm.

"Sid—I—I think I'll say good-bye, now!"

Sidney sprung forward and caught his hands.

"Not yet—not good-bye yet, sir!"

"Why not? I don't fear to say it Sid—I'm strong at—heart—still; it's a brave—a brave parting! No regrets—no sense of duty—neg—lected! A kind father, I hope—a—a good son—I know! God bless you, boy!—peace and happiness to yours—in life. Mattie—think—of him!"

Mattie bowed her head, and covered her face with her hands.

"Sidney—help her, too—if she's in trouble—ever an old friend."

"A true one!"

"True as steel—I know it. Good-bye, Sid—keep strong for—the—old—father's sake. Will—you?"

"Yes."

"*That's well!*"

Sid bent over him and kissed him—kissed the calm face, so awfully calm and still now!—and then turned to Mattie.

"Take me away, Mattie. I can bear no more now. He was spared one trouble, thank God! In all his life he never guessed the end of this."

Mattie turned round, with a new fear possessing her.

"Sidney—Mr. Sidney!"

"Here—Mattie," he said, stretching forth his hand, and grasping, as it were, furtively for hers. "I shall need friends now to help me."

"Not—oh! my God, not blind?"

"I have been blind all day!"

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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